

The 2005 English Church Census

Introduction

The fourth English Church Census was carried out on 8 May 2005. Comparable studies had been conducted in 1979, 1989 and 1998. All were organised and led by Dr Peter Brierley, executive director of the organisation Christian Research prior to his retirement in 2007. An overview of the findings from the study can be found in two books: *Pulling out of the Nosedive*, and *Religious Trends No. 6*, written and compiled by Brierley and published by Christian Research. The document that follows is a revised version (prepared by David Voas) of the introductory material in those books.

Scope

The Census covered all Christian denominations accepting the Trinitarian doctrine (that God exists as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in one being). It thus included all Free, Protestant, Anglican, Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, and excluded the Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Christian Scientists, Christadelphians and Unitarians. There was no coverage of non-Christian groups such as Jews, Muslims and Hindus. The actively religious people thus excluded represented 4% of the UK population in 2005.

A 'church' was defined for the purpose of this Census as a body of people meeting on a Sunday in the same premises primarily for public worship at regular intervals. The congregations approached thus included normal church buildings, and also those meeting for worship in school chapels, Armed Forces chaplaincies, and those in hospital chapels. Congregations that meet on Saturdays (like the Seventh-day Adventists, or Catholics taking Vigil Mass) were counted in. Churches whose services are held fortnightly or monthly were also counted in, but not those used less frequently. Congregations that do not own a building but hire a local school or civic hall for their meetings were included. Some people meet for worship during the week, and these numbers were also counted, but not included in the Sunday total.

The study was limited to England; a similar attendance survey in 2002 covered Scotland. In common with previous studies, the fourth English Church Census included both the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man. It is of course recognised that these two territories are separate jurisdictions legally, but most of the major denominations include supervision of their churches within an appropriate Diocese or Region that is based in England. These two territories are therefore analysed along with the 47 counties in England and included in the commentary where appropriate.

Choice of census date

May 8th 2005 was chosen as it was a day outside holidays and half-terms, away from Bank Holidays and Festivals, and the week before Pentecost Sunday, when some churches hold special services. The weather was mild. No Sunday is ever 'average' but there is no reason to think that the church attendance that Sunday was overall above or below the usual number.

May 8th was, however, the 60th anniversary of VE Day, and a number of churches held special commemoration services. Some indicated to us that they included all the non-regulars who attended that day, others omitted them, and yet others took the Census on another day in

order to get a more normal Sunday. Some drew attention to the Census in their weekly news-sheet. We have not included, for example, the estimated 2,000 people who attended the Cenotaph Service that day, nor those who may have visited the Church of Fools or other web-based churches (whose numbers are not known).

Questionnaire design

We had the competing demands of asking questions to give us the basic data that would be comparable with previous studies, the need to ask much more about midweek activity, the questions that the larger sponsors wished to be included, and all within the overall demands of a maximum size of two sides of one page in a font large enough to read.

The basic questions on total attendance, numbers attending twice, and children, with an age/gender breakdown, have been the same since 1989 and have been used identically in three Scottish Church Censuses. The age-groups were extended in this Census from the six used previously to nine, but this will not affect the total numbers recorded. The draft questions were freshly piloted for this Census.

Method

A number of church leaders were asked in 2003 whether a further Census should be undertaken in 2005, and they were unanimously positive. The Board of Christian Research concurred. A proposal was written and requests for sponsorship made; when sufficient support was forthcoming, the project began. That included forming the Census Steering Committee which first met in September 2004; they agreed the final questionnaire (included with this documentation) at their meeting in March 2005. (For the composition of the committee, see the acknowledgements section below.)

An initial mailing to all the 38,000 churches on the Christian Research database took place in February to let churches know the Census would take place on 8 May 2005, and asked them to let the organisers know of any new churches that had been started in their locality or any that had closed. A huge and very helpful response to this letter was received. At the same time every senior leader (Bishop, Archdeacon, Vicar-General, Regional Minister, Chairman, Superintendent, Moderator, District Commander, etc.) was informed that the Census was taking place.

The crucial mailing took place in April 2005, with a covering letter indicating that the information provided would be treated as confidential. No information on any individual church would be released without its approval. Likewise churches were able to tick appropriate boxes to indicate whether or not they wished to receive future mailings, according to the Data Protection Act.

The thousands of returned forms were then individually checked, and entered on to the Christian Research computers, an exercise that was finally completed in October 2005. The analysis then began.

Almost 3% of English churches did not hold a service on 8th May, some 973 churches in total. This figure is likely to be understated since many churches not holding a service that day will not have replied. These were mostly churches in remoter rural areas whose practice is to hold a service every fortnight or month, some members of whose congregations will perhaps have attended a service in a neighbouring hamlet or village.

These churches that had a zero congregation on Census Sunday were not assumed to have closed, but rather were amalgamated with the other linked churches in recording the results. Thus if there were three linked rural churches, two of which had no service on 8th May, and the third church had 75 people who were a mixture from all three congregations, the church where the service was actually held was recorded as having 75 present and the other two as zero, but not closed. This means that the correct number is included in the overall total, and the size of that congregation is also correctly recorded, and not put as, for example, three congregations of 25 each.

Response

Altogether information was received from 18,720 churches or congregations by the time we stopped entering data on our computers, and details from a further 39 were received subsequently. Several dozen other churches returned details more than six months after the Census. Three-quarters of those supplying information returned one of our forms. We were also able, however, to input data on total attendance, sometimes with additional information, that was very kindly supplied by ten Church of England and eight Roman Catholic Dioceses, the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, the Salvation Army and 91 Methodist Circuits for the remainder.

This gives a total overall response rate of 50.02%, a very much higher response to a postal survey than most research companies expect to achieve today. We are grateful to the army of people who completed the forms or helped us get so much information. That the response rate was so high again shows something of the interest in this Census. Half of the forms ultimately received were returned during the first six weeks; a reminder was sent out after two months, after which a few thousand came in quickly, followed by a long trickle over the following months.

In terms of the overall percentage, the 50% response achieved in 2005 compares to 33% in 1998, and to 70% in 1989. In the 2002 Scottish Church Census we had 52%.

Another test of the plausibility of the results is whether or not they compare reasonably well with existing figures collected independently from the different denominations. Not every denomination collects attendance information, and some, like the Baptist Union of Great Britain, collect it, but do not publish it. The Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church and the United Reformed Church however all collect and publish such information. The Church of England publishes a variety of attendance data; here (and in the books that report on the Census) we take their 'Usual Sunday Attendance' (USA) data as this is comparable to the information collected by other denominations, and to previous Censuses. This is the lowest of the figures produced by the Church of England's Research and Statistics Department: 'Average Sunday Attendance' (ASA) for example is at least 10% higher, and furthermore increased between 2002 and 2003 while the USA decreased. The ASA is measured over a month, and will therefore include special services such as Harvest services, Parade, other All Age services and Baptism services. Such data are clearly useful, but the figures are not directly comparable to the data that we collected in the Census or to other denominations' data. When in 1979 we tried to collect figures averaged over a month, the response rate was lower, and subsequently we were advised that, statistically, measuring on a 'typical' Sunday was as accurate.

Figures published for the years immediately prior to the 2005 Census year are given in the table below.

Year	Church of England	Roman Catholic Church	United Reformed Church
2001	938,000	954,132	81,228
2002	917,000	934,200	79,473
2003	902,000	n/a	75,980
2004	n/a	n/a	72,166
Straight line 2005 projection	865,000	874,400	69,500
English Church Census 2005	867,400	875,600	68,700

The 'straight line projection' is based on the 2, 3 or 4 figures given above and projected to 2005 for ease of comparison. The closeness of the Census figures with these projections suggests that the overall results at least for these three major denominations are reasonable, and on that basis, it is assumed that the other figures likewise will probably be of the right order of magnitude, and that the conclusions drawn are likely to be correct.

In terms of denominational response, the overall figure of 50% breaks down as follows:

Baptist	67
Smaller denominations	57
Anglican	55
Catholic	54
Independents	50
New Churches	49
United Reformed	44
Methodists	37
Pentecostal	30
Orthodox	7

The two largest individual denominations, Anglican and Catholic, both responded better than average. As the figures in Table 1 indicate, the grossed up figures suggest the Census findings are very reasonable. Likewise for the United Reformed Church. While it is disappointing that only a third of Pentecostal churches responded, this is in large part due to the difficulty of tracking down black church leaders, many of whom have full-time jobs in addition to their church responsibilities.

It is obviously of concern that there was such a low response from the Orthodox Churches, but 8th May happened to be 'low' Sunday, or the Sunday after their Easter, when many of their churches were closed. However, even if the grossed up figures are as much as 100%

wrong (which is unlikely), the resulting extra 25,000 worshippers will not change the overall figure greatly, and the total numbers would still be 6.3% of the population.

Estimates have been made for those who did not respond, partly on the basis that their figures would on average be similar to those who did respond, but also by comparing the resulting totals to see if the trend in their figures was reasonable compared with the previous study or with published denominational or other figures.

Key findings

The published estimate based on the fourth English Church Census was that on 8th May 2005, or an equivalent Sunday, there were 3,166,200 people, adults and children, in church in England. This is 6.3% of the population.

It is important to note that all publications based on the census contain estimates of the total churchgoing population and cannot be derived directly from this dataset, which includes only half of the churches in the country. Because of differences in response rates by denomination, region, size of church and so on, arriving at the population estimates is not simply a matter of grossing up the sample values. A sophisticated set of assumptions and constraints was used to produce the published totals.

While many new churches been started between 1998 and 2005, slightly more have closed, bringing the total number of churches or congregations of all denominations to 37,501 in May 2005. The number of churches closing in the 7 years 1998-2005 was at a much slower rate than closures in the previous nine years.

The direction and pace of change are as important as important as the absolute number. Successive studies in this series show that:

- In 1979 there were 5.4 million in church, 11.7% of the population.
- In 1989 there were 4.7 million in church, 9.9% of the population.
- In 1998 there were 3.7 million in church, 7.5% of the population.
- In 2005 there were 3.2 million in church, 6.3% of the population.

It may be seen that over the 9 year period 1989 to 1998, 1 million fewer people went to church, but in the seven years 1998 to 2005 only half a million have stopped attending, fewer than might have been expected. A million loss over 9 years (or a 1.7 million loss over 19 years) would be about a 800,000 loss in 7 years, so as the church has 'only' lost 500,000, it 'gained', as it were, about 300,000 people.

Where have they come from? There were essentially three broad sources: the Black majority and other ethnically diverse churches have been expanding rapidly, the white churches have recruited through Alpha and other like courses or related evangelistic events, and the 'Fresh Expressions' movement has been an additional stimulus. Why then have numbers declined? Because while many were gained, twice as many were lost through death or people simply giving up going to church so often. (The number dropping out from loss of faith is fairly small). It had been hoped that the impact of some of the new experimentation would make a real difference on numbers; this result suggests it has not yet had that effect. The many Willow Creek Conferences, Purpose-Driven Church emphasis, the charismatic renewal, the

cell church programme may all have been important but their cumulative impact has not been sufficient to offset the decline in other areas.

The number found in 2005 includes some of the early results of the many 'fresh expression' churches, and the results of the explosion of ethnic churches. If these were removed from the overall numbers, there would be at least 125,000 fewer people in church, giving a total of 3.04 million or just 6.0% of the population. In other words, the decline in most churches is accelerating.

The questionnaire asked for a wide variety of information. The chapters in the report *Pulling out of the Nose Dive* analyse the basic data essentially one factor at a time, though two or more are used where the subsequent analysis gives important information. All the data can also be broken down by county and some by Local or Unitary Authority. These Tables were too extensive to be included in the main report but are given at length in the *Religious Trends No. 6, 2006/2007*. Additional analyses are also included in that volume, as are coloured maps to show the variations of church-going across England.

Acknowledgements

There are 37,500 churches or congregations in England, so contacting them all for a special event like a Church Census requires much co-ordinated activity. Crucial to the whole process is funding. Bill Lattimer, Christian Research's Business Development Manager, wrote the proposal that helped to generate support for the Census both from various denominations and from Christian organisations.

We had financial support from Ansvar Insurance Company, the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Bible Society, Christian Aid, the Church Mission Society, the Church Pastoral Aid Society, the Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service, the Economic and Social Research Council, the Evangelical Alliance, Holy Trinity Brompton, the Methodist Church, Moorlands College, Operation Mobilisation, the Salvation Army, Tearfund and World Vision.

David Voas, University of Manchester, wrote a detailed proposal that was successful in gaining support from the Economic and Social Research Council. Collectively all these bodies provided the £100,000 this entire exercise has cost.

We are also grateful to many senior leaders who supported this Census by being willing to serve as its Council of Reference. These were: Bishop Dr Joe Aldred (Churches Together in Britain and Ireland), Viscountess Gill Brentford (then the Third Estates Commissioner, Church of England), Rt Rev Pete Broadbent (Bishop of Willesden, Church of England), Gerald Coates (Team Leader, Pioneer), Rev David Coffey (Moderator, Free Churches Group), Rt Rev Kieran Conry (Bishop of Arundel and Brighton, Roman Catholic Church), Rev Dr David Cornick (General Secretary, United Reformed Church), Rev Joel Edwards (General Director, Evangelical Alliance), Rev John Glass (General Superintendent, Elim Pentecostal Church), Rev Katei Kirby (Director, African and Caribbean Evangelical Alliance), General John Larsson (at that time the International Leader, Salvation Army), His Eminence Cormac Murphy-O'Connor (Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, Roman Catholic Church), Pastor Cecil Perry (President, Seventh-day Adventist Church), His Grace Abba Seraphim (Metropolitan of Glastonbury, British Orthodox Church), Dr Neil Summerton

(Executive Chairman, Partnership, Christian Brethren), Rev Michael Townsend (Chairman of Leeds District, Methodist Church) and Rev Dr Nigel Wright (Principal, Spurgeon's Baptist College).

The Census Steering Committee consisted of Rev Derek Allan (Baptist Union of Great Britain), Ian Farthing (Tearfund), Rev Kenneth Howcroft (Methodist Church), Alistair Metcalfe (World Vision), Major David Pickard (Salvation Army), Philip Poole (Bible Society), Russell Price (Church Mission Society), and David Voas (University of Manchester), sometimes represented by Alasdair Crockett (University of Essex). They helped us in many ways, not least in working through the many suggested questions, the results of the pilot exercise (we sent an initial draft to 100 churches of different denominations), and in trying to get the wording as intelligible as possible. They proved tremendously helpful too when it came to publicity about the Census results and checking the draft of this book.

The staff of Christian Research have all been involved: Heather Wraight (Deputy Director) who organised the initial mailing, reminder, data entry and much more, Bill Lattimer with much advice on numerous occasions, Gwen Gowers (Personnel Assistant) who kept us all sane and organised, dealt with many email or phone questions about the form and sorted out address list queries by the hundred, Kim Miles (Research Officer) who provided the large majority of the analyses and gave valuable help with the design of the questionnaire, and Vicky Wharton (Administration Officer) who kept a tally of forms received and provided background support in a hundred different ways.

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Postscript by David Voas: The principal acknowledgement is unstated above, because it is to the author of the book from which this overview is taken: Peter Brierley. He directed the entire series of church censuses and surveys over a period of three decades. It is very unlikely that any of them would have been accomplished without his energy and expertise.



If the details on the address label are incorrect please amend as necessary, thank you

YOUR CHURCH

1. Denomination or other Affiliation _____ 2. Year congregation started _____
- 3a. Is the (senior) minister/leader responsible for any other congregation? YES NO If YES how many? _____
- 3b. A form should have been received for each of these congregations. If any are missing, please write the details below, continuing on a separate sheet if necessary. This will help us to keep our records accurate.
- Name of church/congregation _____
4. Please say how many **paid** staff (if any) are employed directly by your church. (Do not include club organisers, eg playgroup)
- No of full-time (ordained) _____ No of full-time (non-ordained) _____ No of part-time (either) _____
5. Please give year of appointment of (senior) leader _____ Male Female
- Present age of (senior) leader Under 30 30-39 40-49 50-59 60-69 70 or over

SUNDAY ATTENDANCE

Please indicate the total attendance at this church on **Saturday/Sunday 7/8 May 2005**. If there was no service on 7/8 May, then please give figures for the most recent Saturday/Sunday on which the congregation met for worship.

- 6a. Total number of adults (aged 15 and above) attending any service on this date
- 6b. Estimated number of adults attending more than one service on this date
- 6c. Total number of children (aged 14 and under) who are present in services whether or not they also attend a children's group (eg Sunday School)
- 6d. Total number of children who **only** attend a children's group on Sunday but are **not** present in services
7. If no service was held on the 8th May, please tell us the frequency with which worship services are held

We appreciate that it may be difficult to give accurate figures for the next 4 questions, but it would be a great help if you would estimate the answers as best you can.

8. On 8th May 2005 (or the most recent Sunday on which your congregation met for worship) what were the numbers of attenders?

Age group	10 and under	11-14	15-19	20-29	30-44	45-64	65-74	75-84	85 and over
Male									
Female									

PEOPLE

- 9a. Approximately how frequent is the attendance of these individuals?
- Twice weekly _____ Weekly _____ Fortnightly _____ Monthly _____ Less frequently _____
- Are these figures: Estimated? Counted? Visitors/first time attenders _____
- 9b. Approximately how many additional people attend? Quarterly _____ Twice yearly _____ Once a year _____
10. Approximately how many of your adult congregation fall into the following ethnic groups?
- White _____ Black Caribbean/African/Black Other _____ Chinese/Japanese/Korean _____
- Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi _____ Other Asian _____ Other Non-white _____
11. Please estimate how many people in your church read the Bible personally at least weekly _____

ETHOS

12. Which of the following terms best describes your congregation? **Tick up to three only.**
- Anglo-Catholic Broad Catholic Charismatic Evangelical
- Liberal Low Church Orthodox Radical Other, please specify _____

MID-WEEK

- 13a.** Do you have regular mid-week worship (eg services, cell groups etc.)? YES NO
- 13b.** Roughly how many attend during an average week? *Numbers in each age group:* Male under 20 ___ 20-44 ___ 45-64 ___ 65 & over ___
Female under 20 ___ 20-44 ___ 45-64 ___ 65 & over ___
- 13c.** Roughly what percentage of these attend Sunday services? _____%
- 14a.** Do the young people in your church attend a regular youth activity(ies) (eg Rock Solid Club, Youth Club etc.)? YES NO
If YES, are these run by your church or by a combined or ecumenical group? Church Group
- 14b.** Roughly how many attend during an average week? *Numbers in each age group:* Male under 12 ___ 12-14 ___ 15-19 ___ 20 & over ___
Female under 12 ___ 12-14 ___ 15-19 ___ 20 & over ___
- 14c.** Roughly what percentage of these attend Sunday services? _____%
- 15.** Please could you estimate how many people usually attend mid-week church-run activities (eg Drop-in Centres, Lunch Clubs etc.), but do not normally attend worship services at any church. Please exclude outside organisations that may hire or make use of your church premises.
Total number Male under 15 ___ 15-19 ___ 20-44 ___ 45 & over ___
for all groups: Female under 15 ___ 15-19 ___ 20-44 ___ 45 & over ___

- 16a.** Has your church ever run an Alpha course? YES NO Never heard of Alpha
- 16b.** If YES, when did your church hold its first Alpha course? Month/Year _____
- 16c.** Approximately how many Alpha courses has your church run in total? _____
- 16d.** Approximately how many people have attended your Alpha course(s) in total? Visitors _____ Church members _____
- 16e.** If you do not run Alpha, do you use any other course? If so, please state which _____
- 17.** Please number these demands on your church resources in order of priority (1 to 6, where 1 is top priority and 6 is lowest).

	Children/Youth Work	Church Fabric	Church Staff	Evangelism	Preaching/teaching	Poverty
Minister's view						
Congregation's view						

YOUR CHURCH AND MISSION

- 18a.** Which description best fits how your church gives to the Third World? **Tick one box only.**
- We give mostly to long-term projects with which we like to have an active relationship
 - We give mostly to long-term projects, but we don't have much involvement with them
 - We split our giving evenly between long-term projects and one-off gifts
 - We prefer to make lots of smaller gifts throughout the year
 - We encourage people to give directly to agencies
 - We only give occasionally or through a few smaller gifts
 - We do not give regularly to projects in the Third World
- 18b.** ... and which factors are the most important in choosing which agency(ies) to support. **Tick all that apply.**
- Their work fits with the vision of the church
 - A tradition of long-term support
 - Someone comes to speak at the church
 - We give in response to appeals received
 - We receive regular information on where our money goes
 - It is our denomination's agency
 - The personal relationship between church members and the agency
- 19.** Does your church have an active programme of engagement in any of the following areas? **Tick all that apply.**
- Local or national media
 - Local or national politics
 - Social action
 - Primary/Secondary/Tertiary education
 - Popular or higher Arts
 - Sport
- 20.** Tick **up to five** phrases or words which you associate with these groups where **A** is 'Christian mission movements generally' and **B** is 'The ideal agency that your church would like to support'.

	Empowers people	Evangelistic	Faithful	Fights for justice	Gets me involved	Multicultural	Obsessive	Out of date	Out of touch	Spirit-led	Stuffy	Transforming
A												
B												

Name of respondent (in CAPS please) _____

Tel. _____ Email _____ Date _____

Thank you very much for your help. Please return the form in the envelope provided or to:
English Church Census 2005, Christian Research, 4 Footscray Road, Eltham, London SE9 2TZ
T: 020 8294 1989 F: 020 8294 0014 E: ecc05@christian-research.org.uk

Your details are held on a database. Please tick the box if:
 You do not wish this to be released to third parties You do not wish to receive information about other Christian Research products and services