

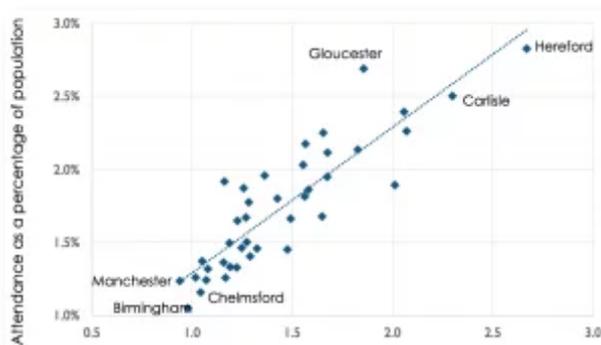
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## Is this the solution to our missional challenge?

October 4, 2018 by Ian Paul



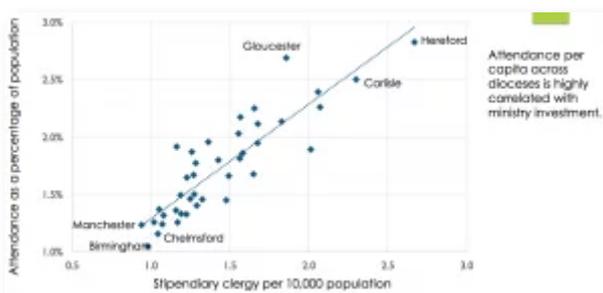
At the last Archbishops' Council, I was rather startled to come across a slide in a presentation on some background issues about funding and mission. The slide offered an analysis of the proportion of the population attending Church of England churches against another factor (whose label I have, for the moment, removed), and there was a striking correlation.

Now, the mission of the Church cannot be *reduced* simply to attendance, but [numbers do matter since numbers represent people](#). And 'coming to church' isn't the only thing that matters, since people have (in the past) come to church for all sorts of reasons, and experienced all sorts of things. But in the present context of numerical decline, addressing the question of how many people actual attend church is at the very least and important part of mission—and attainment of the first goal of the Archbishops' Council ('Evangelism') is measured in terms of growing attendance across the Church.

So, if you could guess what one factor correlated with increased attendance, what would you guess it would be?

My instinctive response was to do with social context. Hereford, Carlisle and Gloucester are substantially rural dioceses, whereas Manchester, Chelmsford and Birmingham are

substantially urban. But it turns out that the correlation in question actually applies within dioceses, and in the comparison between areas of similar social context.



The answer is: **number of stipendiary clergy**. Here is the graph with the axis labelled. And for me it raises a series of questions.

The first question is whether this is a plausible correlation, in terms of the data. There are clearly going to be other factors at work, such as social context; it is widely noted that, although rural areas account for around one fifth of the population as a whole, they contribute two-fifths of the attendance in the C of E. But it is also consistently true that there are more clergy per head of population in rural areas in comparison with urban contexts. Rural ministry can feel very demanding and stretched because of the distances involved and the number of different locations of buildings and services—but note on the chart that Hereford has nearly three times as many clergy per head of population than Birmingham.

There is some other anecdotal evidence for this correlation. Certain traditions of non-conformist churches have larger congregations, but they often draw from wider areas than Anglican parishes, so have lower equivalent attendance per head of population—and have fewer paid leaders. (The correlation is not true for the Roman Catholic Church). It is also worth noting that, one hundred years ago Church of England attendance was very much higher than now—and the ratio of clergy to the population was four times what it is today (there were around twice the number of clergy, and half the population in England).

And I am reliably informed that where you have larger urban parishes, and so fewer paid clergy per head, then church attendance is lower. You would need to see the detailed analysis, across different areas, to be sure of this—but I think the analysis has been done.

**So the second question is:** what does this mean? What is it telling us about ministry and mission? There is one easy answer that has been offered in the past: that ‘church’ means clergy plus building plus services. Some would go further and say, on the basis of that, that

whether anyone actually comes is beside the point. Another form of this is represented in a comment by the bishop who ordained me:

“ Can you imagine the effect of hiring 50 actors in a parish and putting them in dog collars, and having them spend all day wandering around? It would transform the mission of the Church!

I think both these approaches represent the worst form of clericalism, and whatever the sociological or practical points being made, neither can be supported by a credible theology of church or ministry. And two factors undermine a purely ‘clericalist’ approach: the correlation with *stipendiary* clergy (rather than clergy as a whole); and the presence of lay stipendiary ministry. There are not enough example of stipendiary lay people leading congregations (as we have in my deanery) to have a noticeable impact on the statistics, but there is no reason to think that we would get a different result if we simply correlated stipendiary *ministry* rather than stipendiary *clergy*.

Is there an alternative explanation? In Luke’s account of the earlier parts of Paul’s ministry, there appear to be two distinct moments of significance. The first is the direction of the Holy Spirit to:

“ ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’ (Acts 13.2).

The Christians in Antioch do so by prayer and fasting and sending them off; but it only later becomes apparent that the one thing they haven’t done in their ‘setting apart’ is to make any financial provision. They appear to assume that Paul and Barnabas will be able to support themselves. So a second moment comes when Paul is in Corinth, and we read the slightly obtuse comment:

“ ‘When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah’ (Acts 18.5).

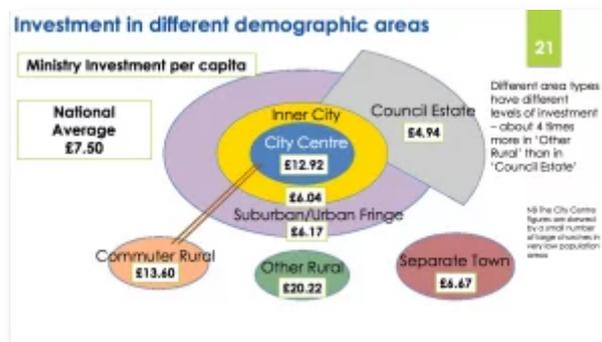
It takes some time to realise that Silas and Timothy have actually brought with them a financial gift from the Christians there which allows Paul’s ministry to be ‘stipendiary’ (see 2 Cor 11.9)—and that seems to make all the difference. When leaders are provided for, then

also in encouraging, discipling and teaching the people of God, who can then become more effect in the mission that God has called the whole church to undertake with him.

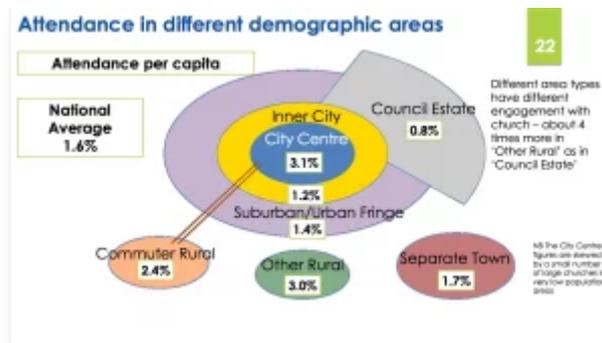
So it seems to me that the correlation between ‘investment in ministry’ (expressed in terms of the numbers of stipendiary clergy or lay leaders) and attendance as a percentage of the population is plausible, and is explicable in terms of the relationship between clergy/leader and the whole body of Christ, and the mission and ministry that we share, without lapsing into an unhealthy clericalism.

**But this leads to the third question:** what should we do about this? How should this correlation affect questions of clergy recruitment and deployment?

The data (with a supporting theology) suggests that the two most notable policy changes in the C of E (the increase in the number of ordinands coming forwards, and a national policy of church planting) are significant steps in the right direction. The Church is unlikely to grow if the numbers of stipendiary ministers continues to decline; and establishing new worshipping communities, particularly in demographic areas where there are fewer congregations, is likely to be a good way of reaching more people with the good news of Jesus.



Within this, though, there are both national and local challenges that arise. A big national challenge is the one that Philip North, bishop of Burnley, [has been drawing attention to](#): the failure of the Church of England to really engage in ministry in the outer estates. Although I have some questions about the details of his argument, the data appear to support the main observation: we have fewer stipendiary church leaders in estates, and correlatively, church attendance is significantly lower (see the two slides to the right).



There is another national challenge which does not surface quite so obviously. Why is it that urban dioceses often have so many fewer clergy or stipendiary leaders than rural dioceses? I suspect the issue is complex, and there is also a circular aspect to this: if church attendance is higher, then giving will be higher, and so a diocese will be able to afford more clergy. But hidden behind this is the difference in historic assets of the different dioceses. Many of the urban dioceses are more recently established, and when they were founded there was a failure to share out the historic assets of the older dioceses, leading to a significant disparity from one diocese to another.

**But there is a local challenge too**, in terms of the distribution of 'ministry resource' within each diocese. I have just come back from our diocesan conference, and if I have understood aright, we were informed that 'parish share' (better called 'giving for ministry') is going to be based primarily on ministry costs, rather than another measure such as congregational size. There are many good things about such a move. For one, calculating share on the basis of congregational size often just looks like a 'tax on growth', appearing to penalise larger congregations. For another, relating giving to ministry offers a sense of ownership and accountability. For a third, connecting giving to ministry costs asks important questions about sustainability of ministry and therefore of congregations; if a congregation remains small, and their giving is not enough to cover the costs of the stipendiary ministry there, what should happen?

And there's the rub. Whilst connecting giving with ministry helpfully asks those questions, it is going to require specific decisions about deployment if mission is going to be effective in areas where church attendance is currently low. If there are inner urban areas or outer estates where we are making little impact, and so congregations are small, tying ministry investment to numbers could simply perpetuate this downward spiral. To reverse the decline will need a deliberate, mission-driven decision to invest stipendiary ministry in these areas, in a way *not* related to the ability of existing congregations to give.

The need to be intentional is good—as long as such intentional decisions are actually made.

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