

... getting the bigger picture in 2016

GROWTH amidst Decline!

The Church Census held in May 2016 was the fourth Census which has been undertaken of Scottish Church attendance, the first being held in 1984, thus giving an overall time frame of 32 years. Each has encompassed a variety of factors, but has especially focused on congregational numbers attending a place of Christian worship on a Sunday in Trinitarian churches. The 2016 Census showed that some 390,000 people regularly attended church, being 7.2% of the Scottish population, down from 17% in 1984.

A compilation of the key results has been sent, as promised, to every church which completed a form in the summer of 2016. This article is an executive summary of the findings. It focuses on numbers attending church and other aspects of church life rather than on the purpose of church, which is mission. “The exercise was certainly well worthwhile and has given us some food for thought,” wrote one Finance Convener in a Church of Scotland congregation in the Scottish Borders.

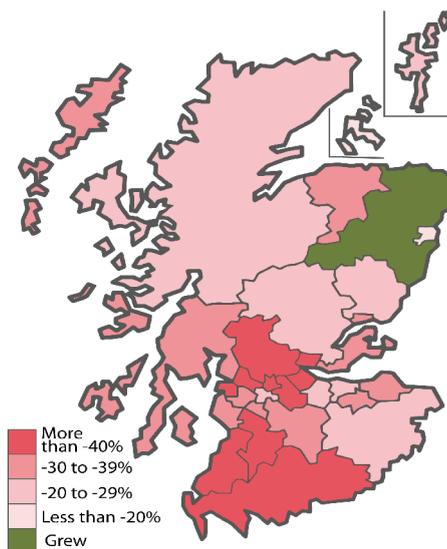
A significant finding was the decline in attendance across all denominations except for the Pentecostals where attendance has almost doubled since the third Census in 2002 and stands at 19,000, 5% of all Scottish churchgoers in 2016. However, many immigrant churches and Messy Churches have also started in the last 10 years, so this is not a pessimistic story of inevitable decline.

1) Growth. Many of the new churches have the characteristics of being led by local lay people, often without theological training, informality in worship, sometimes food, certainly a warm welcome, full fellowship, enterprise, borrowing of premises, with a deep concern for reaching out to others and making sure the worship service is relevant and in the appropriate language! Some 12,000 people regularly attend some 300 new churches started since 2002.

In addition a number of congregations (over 500) reported significant growth over the last five years, leading to an additional 6,000 people in church each Sunday. Over 52,000 children also now attend church who weren't born in 2002, making a total of at least 70,000 new people in Scottish church life, 1.3% of the population.

The growth that has been seen has caused the previously expected decline to moderate, and, although the future trend remains downwards, numbers could fall to just under 300,000 by 2025 if the present trend continues.

Across Scotland the main growth was seen in Aberdeen shire largely because of the number of Polish immigrants, mostly Roman Catholic, employed in the oil industry. The map shows the change in church attendance between 2002 and 2016 by Council.



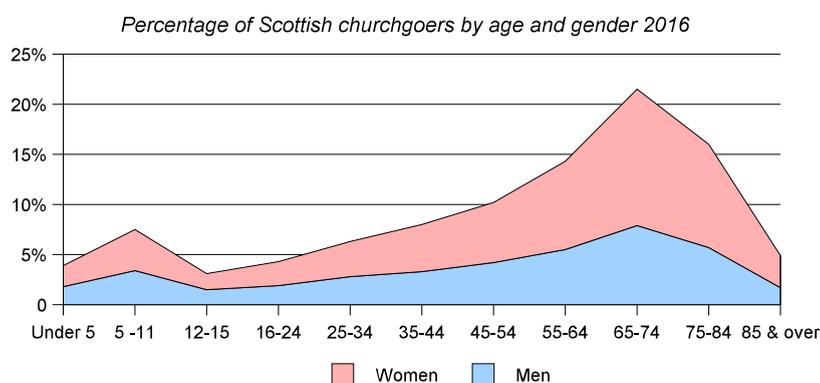
2) Congregations. The Census has focused on congregations rather than churches per se as a number of church mergers have taken place in the last few years without the usual closure of some church buildings. The number of congregations in 2016 was 3,700, down from 4,100 in 1984. While

over 300 churches have started in Scotland since 2002, this has been offset by a greater number of closures. Nearly half, 46%, of congregations acknowledged decline in the last 5 years. The average congregation in 2016 was 105, but 15% were over 200. The decrease in numbers is equivalent to losing 10 congregations per month.

Half of all churches, 48%, held a mid-week youth activity, with an average attendance of 41, down from 59 in 2002. Only two-fifths, 42%, of these also came on a Sunday. Half of all churches, 46%, also held other kinds of mid-week ministry, who were not Sunday churchgoers, with an average attendance of 51, slightly fewer men but younger than usual Sunday attendees.

Two-fifths, 40%, of congregations were Evangelical, up from 38% in 1994 (not measured in 1984), while 24% were Broad/Liberal, 17% were Reformed, 13% Catholic. A large proportion of churches in current use were built in the 19th (30%) or 20th (47%) centuries, with 9% of congregations having started since the year 2000. These latter were either Church of Scotland mergers or new Independent, Pentecostal or Smaller Denominational churches (which included Messy Church).

3) Age and gender of churchgoers. A key finding from this Census was that two-fifths, 42%, of Scottish churchgoers are 65 or over, with a fifth being aged 65 to 74, and a fifth 75 or over. This is



twice the proportion in the population, and has obvious implications for the future. Two-fifths of churchgoers, 40%, are male, slightly more than the 37% in 1984. The oldest churchgoers are either in the Church of Scotland or Scottish Episcopal Church, the youngest are Pentecostal or among the Smaller Denominations group. Declining numbers are especially among those under 45.

4) Other characteristics. Four-fifths, 80%, attend weekly, the remaining fifth less frequently, those aged 35-44 attending less often. 4% of those in church on Census Sunday in 2016 were visitors. An extra 3% of the population attend church at Christmas, especially in Church of Scotland and Roman Catholic churches. A large majority, 94%, of Scottish churchgoers were White, with half the other 6% being Black (four times the population proportion). These latter were mainly aged 25 to 34 and Pentecostal.

Almost half, 45%, of churchgoers had been in their present church for over 20 years, and half, 50%, lived between 1/2 and 3 miles from their church. A third, 35%, of churchgoers (as against churches) were Evangelical, up from 26% in 1994, while another third, 32%, were Catholic, with 16% Broad/Liberal (twice as many women as men), 13% Reformed, and 4% Low Church. Catholics and Charismatic Evangelicals were the youngest. As might be expected, particular parts of Scotland tended to be dominated by certain denominations.

5) Leadership. Four-fifths of church leaders, 79%, are male, with an average age of 57. They have been leading their present church usually for 8 years (11 if Pentecostal); those serving their current church longest were either in Dumfries & Gallo way, Dundee, North Ayrshire or the Shetland Islands..

Two-fifths, 43%, were responsible for more than one church, especially those in Roman Catholic, Scottish Episcopal, Church of Scotland or Methodist churches. Those serving in urban areas were less likely to have such responsibilities. One ninth, 11%, of churches had a youth-worker, 4% full-time, 7% part-time.

6) Mid-week attendance. Three-fifths, 60%, of churches had some kind of mid-week worship, especially Pentecostal, Roman Catholic and Baptist churches. Average attendance at these was 34, up from 27 in 2002, and younger than those who come on a Sunday. Most, 89%, also came on a Sunday.

Together the mid-week work reached almost a quarter of a million people, 235,000, of whom three-fifths, 58%, did not attend on a Sunday, giving a total reach of 10% of the Scottish population coming to church either on a Sunday or mid-week.

7) Local Community. Sponsored questions showed that three-quarters, 72%, of churches sought to meet local social needs and half, 48%, gave regular neighbourhood visitation. A third of churches, 35%, had undertaken an Alpha course sometime, and half (17%) in 2015, giving a total of 940 courses run that year. This included Youth Alpha as well as Adult Alpha, with an average attendance of 12 each. *Christianity Explored* courses had been taken by 10% of Scottish churches.

Three-quarters, 77%, of churches supported charities if they could direct their donation to a specific project or place, but the most important factor was whether the purpose to which it was going fitted in with the church's vision. A third, 34%, of churches had been involved with Tearfund, and three-fifths, 61% with Christian Aid Week. Poverty reduction was well supported, environmental conservation was much lobbied. A quarter, 24%, of churches had raised the topic of legacies.

The Census provides much information. This website has a document suggesting how individual local congregations might use some of the findings (press [here](#) to access). Senior leadership will wish to consider the strategic implications of the key findings about the rate of decline, the serious age factor, and the undoubted fact that within overall decline there are definite shoots of growth along mostly non-traditional lines. Will formality, rules, inflexible structures, resistance to innovation, tradition and rigid denominationalism hinder these shoots of growth or adapt to encompass them?

Peter Brierley (Consultant researcher)