

The Church of England in the First Decade of the 21st Century

Andrew Village

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Decade of the 21st
Century

Findings from the *Church Times* Surveys

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To Leslie J. Francis, Mentor, Colleague, and Friend

PREFACE

The start of the twenty-first century was an interesting time for the Church of England. Historians looking back at this period may draw attention to the major controversies that raged over issues such as how to move on from ordaining women as priests to also ordaining them as bishops, or what to do about the rapidly changing attitudes in Britain to same-sex relationships. They may note other important initiatives that the Church was trying to progress that tended not to make the headlines of the national press, such as Fresh Expressions of Church or the expansion of church secondary schools. If they are typical historians, they will glean their data from official documents, minutes of meetings, media reports and the like. While this may give a good idea of what the people who were in charge were thinking, it might miss out on understanding what the people who comprised the bulk of the Church of England made of all this. They might also miss out on what such people believed about more mundane matters that were not hitting the headlines at the time.

This book is about two surveys that were intended to try and understand the beliefs, attitudes and opinions of the grass roots of the Church of England. Both surveys sampled readers of the *Church Times* newspaper, which ran detailed questionnaires assessing a range of opinions, beliefs and attitudes in 2001 and 2013. The total returns of over 9000 in 2001 and just less than 5000 in 2013 represented about 27 and 21% of the readership of the newspaper at the time. While this sort of ‘convenience’ sample has its limitations, it is (as discussed in Chapter 2)

one of the best measures we currently have of what the rank and file of the Church of England believe about their faith and their Church. The first survey was organized by Leslie Francis, Mandy Robbins and Jeff Astley; the results were reported in the *Church Times* in 2002 and subsequently in their book *Fragmented faith*. The data set also proved to be a valuable resource for academic articles examining a range of more specific questions about beliefs and attitudes in this part of the Anglican Church. I began working on the 2001 data set in 2007 and appreciated the way that Leslie and his co-workers made the data freely available. We always felt that running a repeat survey would be invaluable, and the opportunity came to do so at rather short notice in early summer 2013. Leslie Francis and I organized this second survey, and I was responsible for collating and managing the data set. We had learnt from working with the first survey which questions were the most useful, and although there were some new things we wanted to do, we also recognized the value of repeating some of the same items in the same form so that we could see how opinions changed between the two surveys. That is what this book is about. We decided that for this aspect of the data, I was best placed to analyze and report the results, so while Leslie has offered advice and help throughout, I am solely responsible for any errors or failings in this book.

This book is intended to report the second survey, but in a way that asks two particular questions. The first is whether the differences in opinions between various groups in the Church that were noted in 2001 remain when the new data are added and subject to slightly more sophisticated statistical analysis. *Fragmented faith* took sections of the Church at a time (e.g., lay people or clergy) and examined differences between particular groups (e.g., young and old, Anglo-catholics and Evangelicals). The presentation here treats the whole data set together and uses multiple regression analysis to test for differences after controlling for other factors. This means overall differences between the surveys can be tested after allowing for the different profiles of the two samples.

The second question looks in more detail at the changes between the surveys. The Church of England certainly changed its practice in respect of matters such as the remarriage of divorcees in church and was busy debating the possibility of ordaining women as bishops or whether to allow practicing homosexuals to be ordained. This sort of activity must be accompanied by changes in beliefs, which might happen because everyone shifts their opinion at the same time or because new ideas,

often held by younger people, gradually take over as one generation gives way to the next. As well as looking at the overall change in opinion between surveys, the data also allow us to see whether opinions shifted in particular birth cohorts, indicating that there has been a change of mind rather than just a change of the guard. This analysis is done separately among people from the three main traditions of the Church, namely Anglo-catholic, Broad church and Evangelical. This further allows us to see if opinions moved in the same way in these three traditions, or whether there were pockets of innovation or resistance.

The two surveys covered a lot of ground, asking questions on a wide range of matters that included personal details, worship patterns, theological beliefs and moral attitudes. Not all the items were repeated in the second survey, but a number were, and this book uses 28 such items. Chapters 3–10 report on different topics, and each gives the results of two or more items related to that topic. The introduction to the chapters sets the scene of what was happening in in the Church of England or more widely in England in the period before and after the turn of the century. The data are then reported using graphs rather than tables, and each chapter concludes by reflecting on what the results have shown. The final chapter slices the cake differently by first looking at the independent variables (sex, age, education, etc.) one at a time and asking how they generally related to opinions, and then by summarizing the changes in opinions between the two surveys.

This is a book of data, and there is lots of it. The aim has been to try and present it in a way that allows readers to grasp the key findings easily, without wading through detailed tables of numbers. Instead, I have used graphical presentation in a format that is repeated for each item being analyzed. I have in the past apologized for my use of statistics and graphs, especially when giving talks to church people, but have been chastised for perpetuating a fear of all things mathematical. Most people should be able to grasp the key features of the data from the two main types of graph used throughout the book once they understand what they each display. The analyses used to produce the figures are described in Chapter 2, and it is also worth looking at Appendix 2.1, which explains how to interpret the graphs. This is especially important for the cohort analysis because the presentation is not typical of most cohort graphs, which are based on much longer runs of surveys.

For those who prefer results in words rather than figures, I have tried to summarize the key points in the text of the ‘Exploring the data’

section in each chapter. This means the text can be read with little attention to the graphs and should still make some sense. Those who like to get a quick impression of what is going on will probably just use the graphs instead of reading the results sections in detail.

I was not involved in the first *Church Times* survey, and I thank Leslie Francis and his colleagues for giving me free access to all the data. Leslie in particular has been generous in encouraging me to use the data sets to produce articles and this book. I would also like to thank and congratulate those who edited the *Church Times* for supporting the survey and allowing the data to be used as it has been. Finally, it is most important to thank all those *Church Times* readers who took the time to complete and return the survey. It can be stimulating to complete questionnaires, as many have told me over the years. It can also be tedious and frustrating, as many have also told me over the years. We have been gifted a valuable historical and practical resource because those who participated generously shared their beliefs and opinions.

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