The Hayes Conference Centre at Swanwick, in Derbyshire, celebrated its centenary in 2011. This prompts the question – how many other Conference Centres have been serving the Christian public for so long? The answer is – very few!

Sources of information

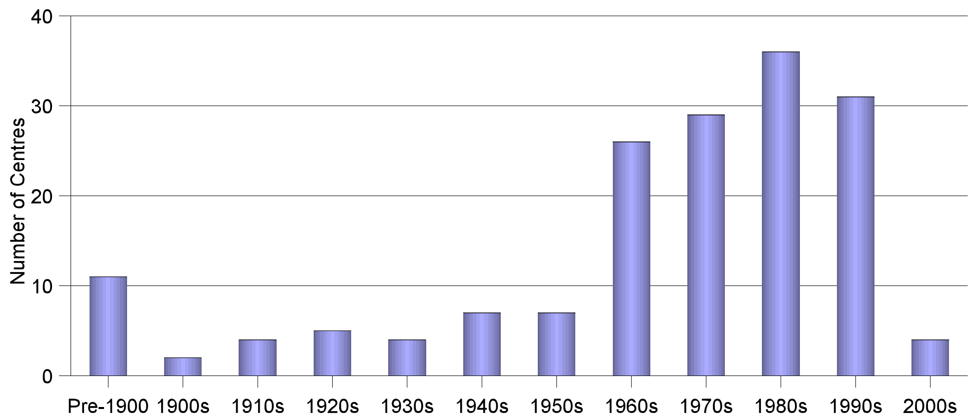
Where does one get such information? What is now called the *UK Christian Resource Handbook* [UKCH] began in 1972 with a list of mission agencies but expanded in 1976 to include Christian Conference Centres, Guest Houses and Hotels. The value of the UKCH is not just that it lists names and addresses but also gives other details such as size, staffing, denominational affiliation if any, turnover and so on. This paper looks at such information and shows how The Hayes compares with other Christian businesses in the UK, drawing mainly on the details in the UKCH and analyses of that data published by Christian Research in successive volumes of *Religious Trends*, now continued in *Church Statistics*.

Year of foundation

The oldest Conference Centre listed in the UKCH is the Royal Foundation of St Katharine, founded in 1147 by Queen Matilda, wife of King Stephen, initially as a hospital for the poor outside the walls of the Tower of London. It has been on its present site near St Katharine Docks since 1825. Primarily an Anglican "oasis in the heart of London" it can cater for 42 people. The next in age, which began is 1855, is now called Belsey Bridge and is part of the Christian Conference Trust (which is also responsible for The Hayes and High Leigh Conference Centres).

The UKCH lists 10 Conference Centres which began in the 19th century and two others which preceded The Hayes in the 20th century. Not all Conference Centres remain viable so others may well have started but were no longer open in 2008, the year in which the details of the latest UKCH refer. The graph shows the decade when existing UK Christian Conference Centres opened.

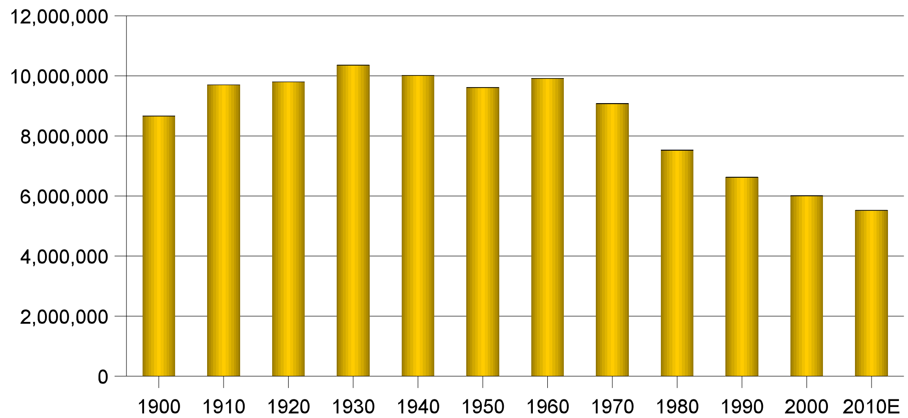
Figure 14.2.1: Decade of opening of UK Christian Conference Centres still open in 2008



The majority of current Conference Centres started in the 1960s or later. Only a quarter (24%) began before 1960, and a third (33%) between 1960 and 1979 and more than two-fifths (43%) later. A fifth (22%) started in th 1980s, the decade when well over a thousand new Christian agencies and organisations were formed or started in the UK. The Conference Centre sector of the Christian scene is no different from others.

Church attendance information is only comprehensively available from 1979, but church membership data stretches back for many decades. Church membership since 1900 is shown in Figure 14.2.2, and it is interesting that as membership declines, the number of new Christian Conference Centres increases! Perhaps leaders saw such Centres as a way of strengthening Christians in their faith and stemming the drift away from the church.

Figure 14.2.2: UK Church membership 1900 to 2010



Church membership grew throughout the 19th century and up until 1930. Apart from 1960 (when it was augmented by huge Irish Catholic migration in the 1950s) it has declined since.

Size of Conference Centre

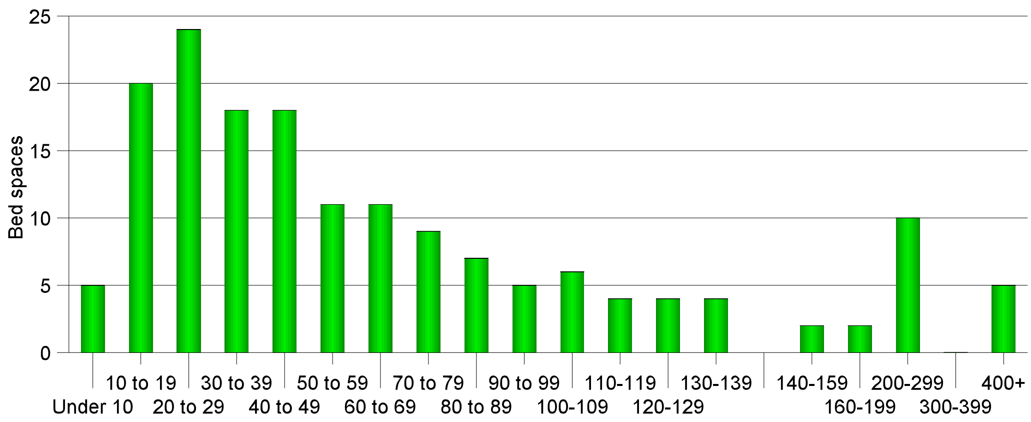
With total bed spaces (not number of bedrooms) of 432, The Hayes is the largest Christian Conference Centre in the UK, although the University of Chichester boasts 435 as a Conference Centre. There are 3 others which have 400 or more: The University of Cumbria in Lancaster (400), Cefn Lea Park Midwales Christian Holiday and Conference Complex (also 400) in Newtown, and Rydal Hall at Ambleside (406). The Hayes is not just the largest, but larger than most other Centres by a considerable margin.

There is no Conference Centre listed in the UKCH with between 300 and 399 bed spaces. The next in size after the five 400+ ones is Ashburnham Christian Trust with 290, followed by the Cliff College Conference Centre with 286 places and the High Leigh Conference Centre with 264 places.

It may be seen that some of these large Centres also function in other ways such as Halls of Residence, holiday accommodation, etc. which while totally valid is not quite the same as Centres dedicated to Christian Conferencing and which specialise accordingly, not least with facilities such as a Chapel, technological facilities and Christian ambience. They provide places to which churches and Christian organisations return repeatedly for their gatherings.

While the average size of Christian Conference Centres in the UK is 77, this is misleading as the larger Centres account disproportionately. Half the Conference Centres have fewer than 49 bed spaces, and the other half have more. The actual distribution is shown in Figure 14.2.3.

Figure 14.2.3: Size of UK Conference Centres, 2008



In statistical parlance, this is a typical negative binomial curve, that is, there is a rapid growth to the peak value, and then a gradual and fairly smooth decrease eventually to zero (in this case at 440 bed spaces). What this also means is that numbers like averages and median values (another statistical term) are not good measures of the distribution.

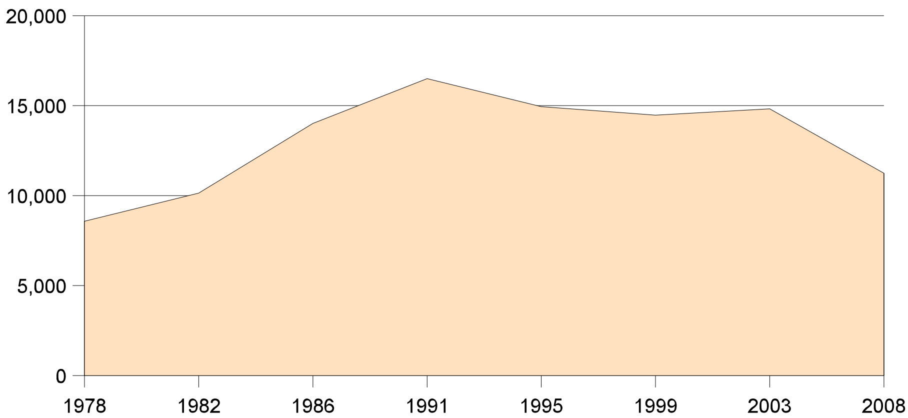
It is much more meaningful to say that just over half (55%) of the Conference Centres have between 10 and 59 bed spaces, and a quarter (25%) between 20 and 39 bed spaces, which suggests if they are to remain viable that most of their bookings will be in this range. By The Hayes standards these are relatively small gatherings, but if the bulk of conference bookings (judging by the size of the centres accommodating them) are of this size, then it suggests that while of course The Hayes should look for and take large bookings, is there a need for it to advertise its availability for "small conferences"? What do the small centres add to the value of a conference which The Hayes may not have? Intimacy? A small comfortable room with armchairs not chairs? A room with a self-service bar? The value of being the only booking in the Centre? Not far to walk to one's bedroom? The bedroom being in the same building as the lounge and dining room?

The size of the Conference Centres shown also suggests that small Centres may have problems with viability. Certainly a number of these smaller Centres have closed in the last 20 years, partly because of their inability to conform with health and safety regulations, which have often required substantial infrastructure expenditure. Presumably there is more profit with a big conference? Is the utilisation rate of smaller Centres better than at The Hayes and other large Centres? Do smaller Centres have the same ratio of shortfall charges as larger Centres like The Hayes? In other words, are there material management factors associated with running larger Centres which are much less relevant for smaller ones? What kind of extra skills do managers of larger Centres need to ensure they remain in business?

The most recent issue of the UKCH lists two universities offering large-scale conference facilities, but if these additions are ignored then the actual size of Conference Centres (as measured by the average number who can be accommodated) has changed little in the last 30 years. When measured for the first time in 1978, the average Centre took 60 people; in 1986 (figures at exact 10 year intervals are not available) the average was 64; in 1995 it was 61; in 2008 (omitting the universities) it was 73. This larger number in 2008 is less of a physical increase in size but more of a listing of others in the UKCH anxious to try and tap into the Christian market by being listed in a publication giving Christian Centres. In other words, the competition for suitable conference facilities is increasing, and it is perhaps the larger centres which are finding it hardest to remain profitable (because it is these which are now additionally listed in the UKCH).

The size of individual Conference Centres is important, but the total number of bed spaces offered within the UK is also known and is graphed in Figure 14.2.4.

Figure 14.2.4: Total number of bed spaces available at UK Christian Conference Centres listed in the UKCH, 1978 to 2008

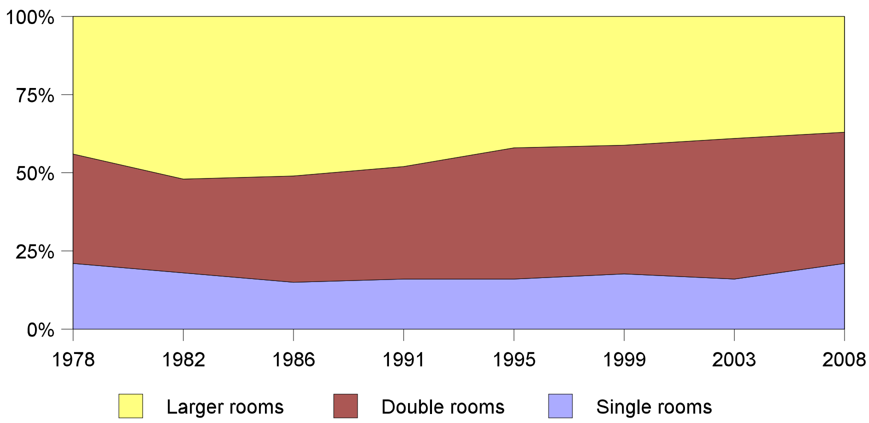


This reflects in the 1980s the number of new Conference Centres opening (shown in Figure 1), and also the slight reduction in total bed availability during the 1990s despite continuing openings of new Centres. During the 1990s there were also a number of Centre closures, which has continued into the 21st century. The UKCH listed 268 Centres in 1999, but only 173 in 2008. This smaller number of bed spaces may also reflect a reduction in demand. It is interesting that of the total number of bed spaces available in 2008, The Hayes accounted for 4%, and the group of which it is part, the largest in the UK, the Christian Conference Trust, for 7%, or one bed for every 14 available throughout the country.

Type of Accommodation offered

What kind of accommodation do Conference Centres offer? The UKCH breaks it down into three categories: the number of single rooms (obviously accommodating just one person), the number of bed spaces in double or twin rooms (which may accommodate one or two people according to usage), and the number of bed spaces in larger rooms (family rooms, dormitories, and so on, accommodating a varied number and often including children). Figure 14.2.5 shows the proportions in these different types of accommodation.

Figure 14.2.5: Proportion of different types of Conference Centre accommodation, 1978 to 2008



Over the last 30 years the broad proportions of single/double/larger have altered quite substantially. The chart shows a steady reduction in the proportion of bed spaces in larger rooms (from its peak of 52% in 1982 to 37% in 2008), and a corresponding increase in the percentage in double or twin rooms (from 30% in 1982 to 42% in 2008). The proportion of single rooms has varied relatively little in this period, but in the last five years has risen from 16% in 2003 to 21% in 2008. Whether this trend will continue remains to be seen.

It is easy to talk of percentages, but it should be remembered that the 2008 proportions represent over 2,300 single bedrooms in Christian Conference Centres in the UK, and 4,700 double rooms. Not all of these are available for every night of the year. Few are open over the Christmas period, for example, and the University Halls of Residence are mostly only available during student vacations. The average number of days open is not known, but suppose the average was for 200 days per year, and the occupation or residence take-up rate was two-thirds, 67%. That then represents some 1.5 million people in these bedrooms in 2008.

Some will be staying for more than one night, and some occupants will not be Christian. Suppose the average stay is for two nights, and that two-thirds, 67%, are Christian. That would mean then something like half a million Christian people stayed in a Conference Centre somewhere in the UK in 2008, and, assuming 2008 was a typical year, in subsequent years also. These figures are of course all guestimated, with little factual evidence to support them, but their value is to give some idea of the total market on an annual basis of those who might wish to use the facilities which the UK Christian Conference Centres are offering.

Another aspect of accommodation is the use of Christian Conference Centres for a single day for meetings, seminars, training, etc. They offer meeting rooms, refreshments, meals and technological equipment. While this obviously under uses bed space facilities, such helps in terms of financial profit, and recommendation/publicity by satisfied and impressed attendees may lead to longer visits on another occasion.

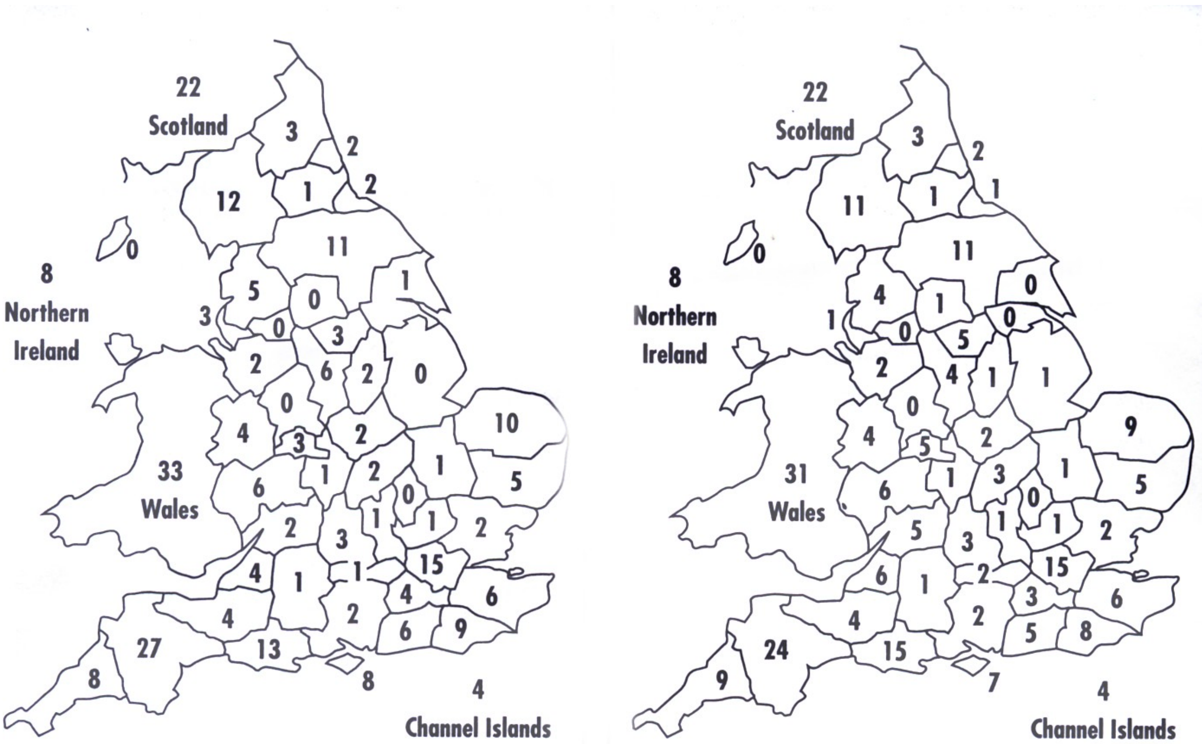
What is also not known directly is the effect the immediate surroundings and leisure facilities have on the appeal and use of Conference Centres. High Leigh has superb grounds and country walks leading from town. Kings Park in Northampton has excellent leisure facilities (for example, tennis, fitness centre, trampolining, badminton and gymnastics) available in conjunction with their Local Authority, as well as table tennis, and snooker in its enormous reception/lounge area. The Hayes has a major sports centre and a new state-of-the-art conference centre called the Derbyshire Suite and is in the process of building a major new Conference Hall. Many Centres have small shops. One small study suggested that organisers do take such facilities into account, but the direct extent of such is not known – whether a Centre is available on the dates required and for the number wanted is likely to be the more important consideration.

Location of Conference Centres

Where are Christian Conference Centres located? By definition they are hardly likely to move around the country! Two maps were drawn in 1995 and 1997 showing the number of centres by county or country and are reproduced in Figure 6 on the next page. These have not been updated to 2008 largely because the implications to be drawn from the maps has not changed, although numbers in individual counties will doubtless have changed a little.

Figure 14.2.6 shows that the Christian Conference Centres are concentrated either in London, Dorset and Devon in the south-west, North Yorkshire and Cumbria in the north, or in Wales. This strongly suggests:

Figure 14.2.6: Distribution of Christian Conference Centres in the UK, 1995 and 1997 respectively



- London is popular because of its convenience, and central travel opportunities
- Areas of outstanding local beauty are popular, presumably especially during the holiday season (although the small number in Derbyshire with its superb Peak District apparently contradicts this)
- Other Centres are popular because they are, in effect, local. Extensive and expensive travel on top of the accommodation and conference costs may influence organisers to choose centres more or less in their neighbourhood.

If this analysis is correct, then the larger centres are important simply because of their size, and implies that the previous comment that they should perhaps adapt more to having smaller more convenient conferences is not the driving market force. The driving force behind larger Centre usage is the need for more bedroom spaces than the 60 or 80 people offered by many Centres for any particular conference.

What then of the Christian market? The above figures estimated it was of the order of half a million in 2008. Using the same percentages as given in the paragraphs on Page 4, but applying them to the peak number of bed spaces shown in Figure 14.2.4 as in 1991, then that year the number of Christian people going to Conference Centres was closer to three-quarters of a million. If these figures are at all in the right order of magnitude, Christian Conference Centre attendance has dropped by a third in the last 17 years. What are the trends in the Christian church?

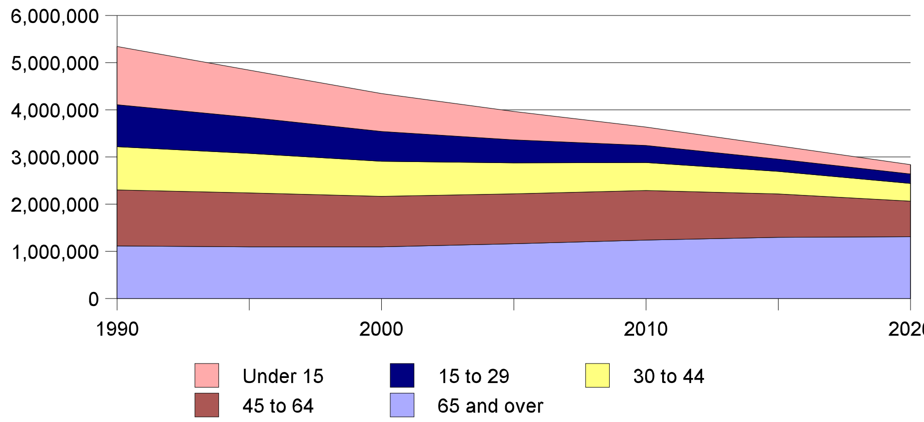
Church attendance over the last 20 years

Figure 14.2.2 showed how church membership changed during the 20th century, and in particular its steep decline between 1960 and 2010. Between 1990 and 2010, the last 20 years, the numbers have declined 27% to 5.5 million in the UK in 2010. If one member in 9 went to a Christian Conference Centre in 1990, then one in 11 did in 2010.

However, many feel that church membership is an unreliable guide to church activity, simply because many members are in the older age groups and are not being replaced by younger people wishing to become church members. Not all members are able to attend church every Sunday, and probably a significant proportion do not attend *any* Sunday (because of ill health, lack of transport, or living in an institutional home, for example). Church attendance data is not readily available for Northern Ireland, but in 2010 it was estimated (in *Religious Trends* No 7) that some 3.51 million people attended church on an average Sunday in England, Wales and Scotland. Subsequent figures which have been published suggest that, if anything, that figure is a slight under-estimate, the real figure being closer to 3.63 million. If the half-million Conference Centre figure for attendance is reasonable, that would suggest that one in every 7 attended a Centre (assuming all attendees only went once; obviously if some went more frequently then the number of different people attending would be smaller).

The number of people attending church in Great Britain is shown by age-group in Figure 14.2.7, and is forecast through to 2020 to show the likely trends.

Figure 14.2.7: Church attendance on an average Sunday, 1990 to 2020



In terms of total numbers, the number in 2010 is a third, 32%, less than in 1990, about the same rate of decline as attendance in Christian Conference Centres. If this is a real correlation and not just two separate trends which happen to be similar over the same period of time, then the estimated proportion of 2020 church attendance of 2010 attendance, 78%, suggests that Christian Conference Centre total attenders could drop by a fifth on current totals over the next 10 years. If that forecast should be fulfilled, it is likely that more Conference Centres will close in the decade ahead.

Church attendance is not the only marker for the future, however. The actual number of churches is unlikely to change as rapidly. The number in Great Britain in 1990 was 47,800, and dropped 3% to 46,200 by 2010. As the decline is so much smaller than the decline in attendance this simply means that the average size of a church congregation is getting smaller (110 in 1990 and 80 in 2010). If size of church is an indication of size of bookings by churches at Conferences

Centres, then more smaller conferences are very likely to be required.

Conference Centres are not just used by churches. Many Christian organisations use them for conferences, seminars, training and other events. In 1990 there were 4,700 organisations listed in the UKCH, an almost identical number to that in 2008 if allowance is made for new categories added in the later edition. This similarity hides the fact that new organisations are started, while others are closing. Getting exact numbers of those starting and closing would take many hours, but a broad overview suggests that about 1,000 have started in the last decade while about the same number have closed. Whether the new organisations will wish to use Conference Centres as much as older ones is not known. Which kind of organisations have closed? One analysis made a few years ago showed that a minority of closures were likely to be older agencies or organisations, and a majority were newer ones started 20 to 30 years ago (many in the 1980s as already mentioned) which often find it difficult to find a suitable successor to follow the original pioneering visionary.

This prompts the question: which churches and which organisations are *least* likely to close in the coming decade? The answer is similar – the larger churches and the larger agencies, partly because they have resources to call on when times get tough, but also because they are usually in the hands of leaders able to find creative solutions to difficult circumstances. Does that imply that large Conference Centres should especially focus on larger churches and organisations?

Figures for larger agencies are difficult to quantify as they are so disparate, but larger churches are easier. In the Church of England approximately 1% of its 16,400 churches have congregations in excess of 350 on a Sunday. That 1% of churches drew about 12% of the *total* Anglican attendees in England in 2010.

Another relevant trend in church life for Conference Centres could be the fact that attendance at *mid-week* services has grown over the past 10 years. Numbers coming add about 10% to Sunday worshippers, and roughly half of these only attend mid-week. Could some church gatherings taking place mid-week move to Conference Centres sometimes?

Figure 7 also shows that the average age of churchgoers is getting older. The number of older churchgoers remains fairly static, while the number of those under 65 decreases, and especially those under 30. Older Christians are probably more likely to have been to a Conference Centre sometime in the past, many may well still go, and probably they would continue to be willing to attend in the future (if suitable accommodation and transport is available). However, dependency on the ongoing viability of a Centre due to the continuing attendance of older people may work in the next 10 years, but cannot be a viable solution for 20 years hence.

- What will keep older people coming?
- What needs to be done to attract younger people?
- What facilities do middle-aged (often families with dependent children [under 16]) people require if they come on a holiday or for a conference?

So what does all this say?

This paper has looked at the world of Christian Conference Centres in the UK, briefly over the 20th century, and in more detail over the last 20 to 30 years. It has shown that:

- Many new Conference Centres have opened in the last 50 years, and especially in the last 20 years of the 20th century.
- Half the Christian Conference Centres have under 50 bed places, and a quarter are in the range of 20 to 39 spaces, suggesting that many relatively small meetings, or conferences take place and can be accommodated in such Centres.
- The total number of bed spaces remained roughly constant during the 1990s but has fallen quite substantially since.
- The type of accommodation offered has included an increase in double rooms over the last 20 years, and a reduction in larger rooms. Both types account for about two-fifths of spaces, with the remaining fifth being single rooms.
- While not discussed above, the average size of the largest room available for group use has remained at about 100 since first compiled in 1991.
- Conference Centres are not equally distributed around the country, with more in places near to beautiful scenery, or urban centres.
- There has been a decrease in numbers visiting Christian Conference Centres over the last 20 years, roughly similar to the decline in either church membership or church attendance.
- If this association is real, then numbers coming to Christian Conference Centres in the decade ahead are likely to fall by a further fifth.

This kind of information requires strategic assessment and tactical action either by CCI, the Christian Conference Centre industry central body, or by individual Conference Centres, if the implicit likelihood of fewer attendees at Conference Centres and more closure of Centres is not to be fulfilled.