

In 1998, a third (31%) of those going to church in England were 60 or over. By 2005, that percentage had risen to 35%, and in 2010 it is estimated to be two-fifths (41%). It is not just in the church that the number of older people is increasing. In 1960 there were 550 people to whom the Queen sent a card celebrating their 100th birthday, each signed personally. In 2010 there are expected to be 12,800 centenarians, far too many cards for the Queen to sign, so her signature is printed now.

It might be asked, “What constitutes old age?” An interesting question in a major survey of 2,200 people in 2008 found that just over a third (33%) of the sample put 70 as the time when people reach old age, although a further quarter (23%) put it later.¹

The transition to an older society is seen in statistics such as the average age of the population in 1960 being 36, while in 2010 it is 40, or that a person of 50 in 2010 will live an average of 7 years longer than a person aged 50 in 1960, courtesy better health provision. Those aged 60 or over were 17% of the population in 1960, but 23% in 2010, a much lower percentage than in the church.

What may surprise is that this is a global phenomenon. Table 14.3.1 shows the increasing proportion of older people, which is projected to rise in both the developing and developed worlds. Across the world the *proportion* of those over 60 is set to double, increasing in *numerical* terms from 750 million in 2009 to 2 billion by 2050².

The figures in the pen-ultimate column show that we in the UK live slightly longer than those in other parts of the western world. Likewise the average length of life of churchgoers is expected to be greater than the general population, probably largely because fewer are likely to die from the effects of smoking and drinking alcohol in excess.³ The difference of an extra 4 years was actuarially estimated on Anglican clergy when their pensions were adjusted several years ago, and that difference is assumed to apply to ordinary churchgoers as well. Maybe it will increase slightly by 2050.

Table 14.3.1: Increasing numbers of elderly people

Item	Developing World	Developed World	World: Overall	United Kingdom	
				Population	Churchgoers
% Over 60 2010	9%	21%	11%	23%	41%
% Over 60 2050	20%	33%	22%	31%	77%
Average life 2010	66 years	77 years	68 years	79 years	83 years
Average life 2050	74 years	83 years	76 years	87 years ⁴	92 years?

European Trends

The UK is of course part of Europe, but the population changes currently taking place in Europe are quite untypical of what is happening in other parts of the world, developed or developing. The population replacement level, called the Total Fertility Rate (TFR), needs to be an average of 2.1 children per woman. If the TFR is below 2.1 the population is declining, and if it is above, it is increasing. Naturally it varies somewhat in any particular area or country over relatively long periods of time, say decades, and the overall trend is important as well as the absolute value.

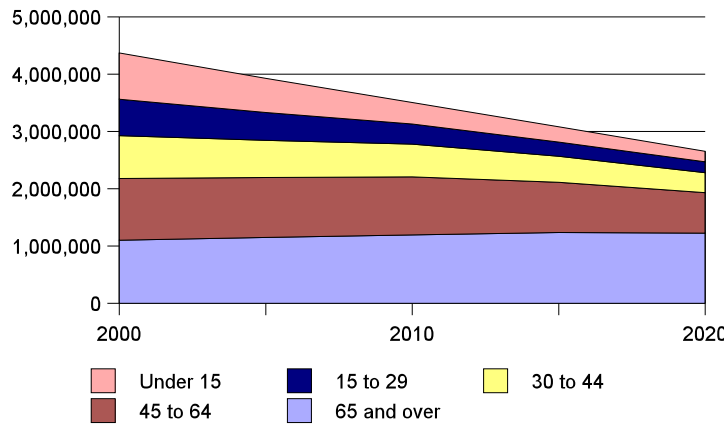
If the value is too low then it is very difficult for the population to grow quickly; the proportion of elderly people increases and the consequent ratio of elderly to workforce makes it difficult for the government to get sufficient income tax to pay for services provided. Elderly people need more medical and other care; in the UK, for example, there are expected to be 1.7 million people with dementia in 2050⁵. So the fact that the TFR is only 1.2 in Poland, and 1.3 in Germany, Greece, Italy and 8 other European countries in 2005 is actually very serious for those countries, as it will take 80 to 100 years to correct the downward trend.⁶ The overall TFR in Europe averaged 1.4 between 2000 and 2005.⁷ In the UK the TFR is 1.9, made up of 2.5 for non-British born people and 1.8 for British born.

Mr Jérôme Vignon, Director of the European Commission’s Directorate for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities wrote⁸: “The European Union is facing unprecedented demographic changes that will have a major impact on the whole of society. The issues are much broader than older workers and pension reforms. The ageing society will affect almost every aspect of our lives, from consumption patterns, business and family life to public policy and voting behaviour.” Lola Velarde, President of the Institute for Family Policies, points out that abortion is “one of the causes of the demographic decline in Europe”. In the single year 2007, Agenzia Fides reported that 1,200,000 abortions were registered across Europe, equivalent to one every 25 seconds.⁹

British Church Attendance

The graph shows the age of churchgoers between 2000 and 2020, based on Church Censuses.¹⁰

Figure 14.3: Age of British churchgoers, 2000 to 2020



The scenario reflected here is extremely serious. It is obvious that the numbers of those under 45 shrink rapidly from 50% in the year 2000 to 37% by 2010 and to 27% by 2020, if present trends continue. The graph shows a catastrophic loss of children under 18, which must be a major concern for the healthy survival of the church in the longer term. “Half the Church of England parishes have no work among young people,” said an official 2005 Anglican publication.¹¹

The key issue is whether present trends will continue. The downward slope is largely due to the absence of young people; many teenagers left the church in the 1980s and many children under 15 in the 1990s. Twenty and thirty years later there is a dire absence of those in their 30s and 40s, and no sign of younger replacements. Unless this circle can be broken, the church will survive only as a group of increasingly elderly people, both living longer and, because of their generational habit, continuing to go to church regularly, every week, whereas their younger counterparts only attend perhaps once a fortnight or once a month. A 2009 Church of England survey found “very nearly half of the adults in core congregations are 65 or over.”¹² Other denominations are younger, but, even so, almost half, 47%, of all churchgoers in 2020 will be 65 or over (and 53% 60 or over).

There are three key concerns for church leaders: the continuing losses of those under 30 (keeping those of this age-group is almost as important as reaching them!), retaining those aged 30 to 50, and how best to use the skills and energies of the increasing numbers of those over 50 and especially over 60 facing or experiencing retirement.

Generations of older people

For over 100 years the age of 65 has always been considered “retirement age” for men, with 60 for women, at least in the developed world. Invented by Otto von Bismarck in the 1880s when he needed a starting age for paying German war pensions, he cynically chose 65 because his officials told him it was the typical age at which soldiers died.¹³ Many in the 20th century have only seen a few years of retirement.¹⁴ When a government press release in August 2008 announced there were now “more pensioners than children for the first time” it generated some interesting articles – “apocalyptic demography” was the title of one.¹⁵

People are also working longer. Employers generally find older people are more reliable, more confident, have a stronger work ethic, better interpersonal skills and work better in teams. On the other hand they are less healthy, less energetic, slower to learn, harder to train, less able to use new technology, less creative, less co-operative and more resistant to change¹⁶. Similar characteristics would apply to older churchgoers in relation to their service with the church.

Older people are not homogeneous; they fall into different groups as illustrated in Table 14.3.2 on the next page, where those in their “Third Age” are taken for simplicity as aged 65 to 74 (as defined by the Office for National Statistics), although others sometimes use a wider age-band for this title.

These four groups are different, not just because of age variations but because of attitudes and values variations also. Thus Third Agers are often different from the group sometimes called the “Fourth Age” (those 75 and over), a point important for church and organisational leaders as it means that those in the Third Age are NOT younger versions of the Fourth-Agers. Gerontology is a fast growing academic subject, and the findings from its research must be applied for those 85+. As a 2010 advertising leaflet for Age UK¹⁷ says for this age-group, “I’m so glad you didn’t ignore me.”

Table 14.3.2: Different age-groups of older people

Group	The Younger Old	The Third Age	The Active Frail	The Inactive Frail
Age	55 to 64	65 to 74	75 to 84	85 & over
Activity	Still employed	Retired	Enjoying being a grandparent	Confined to home
Sufficiency	Earning a salary	Travelling with Saga	Loss of spouse	Increasing dependency
Church life	In leadership	Supporting role	May need help to get there	Only attend on special occasions
Sense of belonging to church	43%	34%	28%	19%
% who went to Sunday School	32%	38%	46%	51%
% of all English church attenders	14%	18%	10%	2%
% of English population in this age-group attending church	12%	13%	10%	8%

At what stage do people move from being mainly contributors to being mainly receivers? It is true that those in their Third Age still have much to contribute to social and church life (as the many activities of U3A testify – the University of the Third Age), whereas those who are 85 or older are much more dependent on carers, special homes, people providing transport, Day Care Centres and the like. The transition seems to be usually somewhere between 75 and 85. At some stage also, “ageism” sets in¹⁸, and the desire to help the church move forwards diminishes. A letter received from a church when asked if they could distribute a leaflet said:

“Dear Sir, As Deacon to our local Chapel I receive many invitations and many suggestions, none of them feasible. We have a regular attendance of 5 people, all over 70. Our oldest lady is 83, and my wife is disabled. May I suggest that the place for children to come to know God and His Son Jesus Christ is in the schools as we were. We were given that chance, today’s children are not. With all due respect.” [Name supplied].

The success of the many “Back to Church” special Sundays in September is because many in the older age-groups went to Sunday School as children, as indicated in the bottom line of Table 2. Started in 2004 by the Bishop of Manchester, Rt Rev Nigel McCulloch, this initiative has now spread throughout all Dioceses in the Church of England, and to other denominations. A percentage (initially about 50% but now closer to 10%) of those “coming back” continue on into regular church life, and cumulatively have perhaps increased overall church attendance by up to 1% in the last 7 years.¹⁹

Different cohorts

Table 14.3.3 on the next page shows the age of selected cohorts at the time of cultural or economic events for those living in the UK, and is illustrative of the broad principle that age cohorts can vary widely.²⁰ If we take the start of the 55 to 64 age range, then a person 55 years old in 2010 would have been born in 1955, a person now in the middle of their Third Age (say 70) would have been born about the year 1940, and a person born in the middle of the two older groups (85 now) would have been born in 1925.

“Fourth Agers” roughly correspond to those born in 1925 in this Table. They went to school in the 1930s and fought in the Second World War. Their values were partly driven by their parents living through the 1930s recession and their worldview by the horrors of war. Their world was that of the British Empire, which covered half the world in pink. These are the “Senior” generation.

The Builder Generation

Third Agers correspond roughly to those born in 1940 in this Table. These are the “Builder” generation. They lived through the “swinging sixties” largely when their world views were already formed (in their early 20s) and were generally shocked by what was happening. The British Empire mostly shattered into pieces while they were in their 20s or early 30s, and in the same period Bishop John Robinson’s very divisive book *Honest to God* was published (in 1963). They have been major beneficiaries of the boom years in employment. Many Christian businesses and organisations were started when the Third Agers were in their late 30s or early 40s (and not a few organisations have found it difficult to find equally visionary successors). Many joined and gave their energy to the House Church (later New Churches) Movement. Spring Harvest started in 1979; the Jubilee Centre and MARC Europe in 1983.

Table 14.3.3: Age of people born in different years when significant events occurred

Event	Year	Born in 1925	Born in 1940	Born in 1955	Born in 1970
End of War in Europe	1945	20	5	~	~
Elizabeth II becomes Queen; World Vision 2 years old	1952	27	12	~	~
Billy Graham's Haringay Crusade in London	1954	29	14	~	~
Soviet Union launches Sputnik 1	1957	32	17	2	~
Oral contraceptives available	1961	36	21	6	~
The Beatles begin; UK Abortion Act; first colour TV	1967	42	27	12	~
Man lands on the moon; UK Divorce Reform Act	1969	44	29	14	~
Oil crisis; Lausanne Congress, Switzerland	1974	49	34	19	4
Sony Walkman launched; Shah of Iran forced into exile	1979	54	39	24	9
Falklands War; CDs go on sale	1982	57	42	27	12
Second Lausanne Congress; Berlin Wall comes down	1989	64	49	34	19
Nelson Mandela elected President; Bill Clinton in 2 nd year	1994	69	54	39	24
Death of Diana, Princess of Wales; Tony Blair becomes PM	1997	72	57	42	27
President Bush starts first year; 9/11	2001	76	61	46	31
Last commercial flight of Concorde	2003	78	63	48	33
Barack Obama elected US President; Gordon Brown is PM	2007	82	67	52	37
Global economic crisis continues; UK Coalition Government	2010	85	70	55	40

In terms of church attendance, the Builder generation is the most dominant in 2010 – one in 6 churchgoers are in this age-group. In general terms they have adequate money, they have time, they have energy and they have vision. Can these assets be used more by the churches? They are the key generation at this moment in church and mission terms, hence the need for “Grandparents and Mission” seminars and the wealth of conferences and activities for this age-group. In the

UK, there are some 750,000 churchgoing grandparents – in the comparatively short “window of time” they are available, how can their opportunities be prioritised? They are not to be regarded as younger versions of people 10 or 15 years their senior, as they think and live differently. Their attitude to later life is also different from that of their parents, who were frequently reluctant to give up their homes, but Builders now find specialised accommodation is often more acceptable.

In technical terms, their “consumption” patterns are also totally dissimilar – they focus on spending on interests, hobbies, travel and leisure, they disagree with the standards and behaviour of the young often acutely, and can be intensely individualistic.²¹ “The increasing individualisation and diversification of post-working life ... will become more pronounced.”²² Health, housing and social support will become ever more important in determining the well-being of older people.²³

The Boomer Generation

This generation is represented roughly by those born in 1955 in Table 14.3.3. The sexual revolution occurred while they were growing up and became part of their way of life. They grew up with Rock ‘n’ Roll. They took their young families to Spring Harvest in their thousands in the 1980s, and brought a huge wave of charismatic life to churches of all denominations, both in the UK and elsewhere. Their dislike of institutional life probably began then. They were born *before* the general availability of television, frozen foods, Xerox, contact lenses, the pill, credit cards, laser beams, ball-point pens, dishwashers, air conditioners, FM radios, yogurt, guys wearing earrings, “software”, Pizza Hut, McDonald’s and instant coffee!

Boomers have taken the electronic revolution as it came and found the time to keep pace with it. They will begin to retire in the next decade,²⁴ and some will return to church, but the church they knew in the 1950s when they were children has now probably changed almost beyond their recognition and expectations. Spirituality for many of them is a “journey”, not a decision. When these retire, “final-pay” pensions will not be common, so they will have less money. The Wanless Report into social care for older people points out that “the rising expectations of the baby boomers will be one of the most pressing concerns for policy makers in the next few decades.”²⁵ They will increasingly engage with the consumer society for leisure and pleasure. Others suggest that “the ageing of the boomer generation may help to change attitudes to later life, but policies and practices, as well as attitudes, tend to lag behind demographic change.”²⁶

One major issue is passing on “the baton” of church leadership from the Builder generation to the Boomer generation and from them to the GenX generation. But this is not happening smoothly or gently in many cases. George Barna says the key sticking point is power. Boomers, he says, “love power” and live for it.²⁷ While they need to let go of the reins they also need to recognise the emergence of new models of ministry (such as, in the UK, Messy Church, Emerging Church, Fresh Expressions, Church Without Walls and so on). In a London seminar for older people in October 2009, Mark Russell, Chief Executive of the Church Army, confirmed that mission-shaped church thinking was very relevant for older people, saying “it means letting the type of person you are hoping to connect with shape how you do church.” Although it has now ceased for financial reasons, the Church Army for many years produced an information bulletin *Focus on Older People*. However, at least one organisation for evangelising older people, the Outlook Trust, is flourishing.

The GenX Generation

The “GenX” generation, so called after a book with this title was published in 1992, is approximately represented by those born in 1970 in Table 14.3.3.²⁸ Different expressions of sexuality are equally acceptable. Self-determination was the political sounding board of both President Reagan and Prime Minister Thatcher when GenXers were in their teens, and that individualism and “we can do it” attitude has remained with them. No wonder so many find it hard to resonate with traditional church life, and why so many older church leaders find teaching discipleship to this group so difficult. Missions are supported – so long as charity begins at home, and so long as overseas it embraces relief and development. Their experience of church is of a declining group; relatively few embrace radical evangelism.

What does all this say?

That the generations are truly HUGELY different. The global ageing population is without parallel in human history, and will have major consequences for all facets of human life. Whereas church culture used to be defined denominationally (such as Anglican or Methodist) or socially (such as professional or working class), today’s culture is defined generationally, and each generation has to be reached appropriately. Generational cohorts, whatever their fancy names, are the groups which need to be evangelised, converted, discipled and shepherded into service in a thousand different ways as far as the church is concerned, and such cohorts should be the new criteria for our strategic action.²⁹

NOTES

- 1 *British Social Attitudes*, 26th Report, Alison Park et al, Sage and National Centre for Social Research, 2010, Page 165.
- 2 Population Estimates and Projections, United Nations Population Division, Press Release, March 2009.
- 3 Research has shown that key decisions in these areas are taken when people are aged 40 to 59, and future styles of living come from those decisions. So article “class barriers in successful ageing”, *Society Now*, Issue 7, Spring 2010, Page 7.
- 4 Taken from *Population Trends*, Office for National Statistics, Volume 137, Autumn 2009, Table 5.1 and the website www.actuaries.org.uk respectively.
- 5 Talk at University College London “The new biology of ageing” by Professor Dame Linda Partridge, 20th October 2009.
- 6 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-3X5hIF on Muslim demographics from Friends of Muslims, March 2009.
- 7 *Europe in Figures*, Eurostat, 2008, Table SP11, Page 45.
- 8 *Sigma*, The Bulletin of European Statistics, October 2008, Page 50.
- 9 Article “Europe needs Jesus!” in *Sword*, Volume 4, Number 6, November/December 2009, Page 34.
- 10 *Religious Trends*, No 4 for Scotland and No 6 for England, Christian Research, Eltham, London, 2003 and 2006.
- 11 *Resourcing Mission within the Church of England*, Report of the Group established by the Archbishops, GS 1580B, 2005.
- 12 *Celebrating Diversity in the Church of England*, Report to the General Synod, February 2010, and article in the *Church Times*, 5th February 2010.
- 13 *Peoplequake*, Fred Pearce, Eden Project Books, Transworld, 2010, chapter “Silver Lining”.
- 14 *The Importance of being Elderly*, paper by Dr John Dubbey, Norwich, March 2010.
- 15 See “An ageing population and apocalyptic demography” by Bill Bytheway and Julia Johnson, *Radical Statistics*, Issue 100, Page 4, but the whole issue gave the papers from their 2009 Conference on “An ageing society: are we prepared?”
- 16 Juliet Whitworth, Head of Commissioning and Research, Local Government Association, speaking at Summer event of the Social Research Association, 1st July, 2010.
- 17 Age UK is the new force combining Age Concern and Help the Aged.
- 18 Article “Older people have a part to play, too” in the *Church Times*, 7th May 2010.
- 19 Article in *FutureFirst*, Brierley Consultancy, October 2010, Page 2.
- 20 Taken from *Ageing in a Consumer Society*, From passive to active consumption in Britain, by Ian Rees Jones, Martin Hyde, Christina R Victor, Richard D Wiggins, Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs, The Policy Press, Bristol, 2008, Page 23, but amended and adapted, with Christian elements introduced.
- 21 *Ibid.*, Page 36.
- 22 *Ibid.*, Page 117.
- 23 *Well-being of Older People in Ageing Societies*, Asghar Zaidi, European Centre Vienna, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2008, p 26.
- 24 Article “Reaching the Baby Boomers” by Roger Standing, *Christianity magazine*, November 2009, Page 24, taken from his book *Re-emerging Church*, BRF, 2009.
- 25 *Op cit.*, *Ageing in a Consumer Society*, Page 111.
- 26 Article “The Age Revolution”, by Professor Alan Walker, Director of the New Dynamics of Ageing Research, *Society Now*, Economic and Social Research Council, UK, Issue 4, Summer 2009, Page 11.
- 27 Article “Gracefully passing the Baton” by George Barna, *Barna Update*, December 2009, Page 2.
- 28 Sometimes called the “Buster Generation” because they stopped (bust) the Baby Boomer generation.
- 29 A view strongly supported by secular business planners; article by Jeremy Kouri, *Professional Manager*, March 2010.