

Dr Neil Summertown, Chairman of Partnership, the network of churches of Christian Brethren background, posed an interesting strategic question – has the advent of paid Youth Workers into the British church scene been successful? Ever since Robert Raikes started the Sunday School movement back in 1780, there has always been the necessity for a huge number of volunteers to work with the children in our churches. At its peak (which lasted for about 25 years, 1880 to 1905), some 56% of the nation's children went to Sunday School every week (see previous article). In 1905 that meant more than 7 million children in total. The largest, in a Stockport church, had 5,000 children!¹

There is no data whatever on the size of an average class, but if it was, say, 25, that means well over a quarter of a million teachers spread across the 50,000 churches that were in the UK in 1905 or about 6 volunteers for every single church – a veritable army who taught children Bible stories, good manners, honesty, uprightness, faithfulness and doing one's duty. A recent book (see Page 14.4) has suggested it was this teaching on such a wide scale that sustained Britain through two World Wars and the depression in between².

Nor is there any data on the age (or gender) of the majority of these volunteer teachers, but there is no reason to think that they didn't come from all ages of people in church life, since church membership was high at the start of the 20th century (almost a quarter, 23%, of the UK population). It peaked at 10.4 million in 1930.

Measuring basic numbers

The first English Church Census took place in 1979 and the second 10 years later in 1989. A comparison of the two sets of figures showed that during the 1980s a huge number of teenagers had left the church. Church leaders didn't need the Census results to be told that – they simply confirmed what they already knew from experience. The question was what to do about it. The 1989 Census also showed that while the number of those in their 20s coming to church had dropped, those 30 and over still came in good numbers. It is likely that these (to be dubbed later the "builder" or "booster" generation), who liked to teach and share their knowledge, were often Sunday School teachers.

But change was already happening, and the Builder Generation was giving way to the Baby Boomer Generation in the late 1980s and when these folk hit their late teens and 20s they dropped off going to church. There began to be a dearth in the numbers of volunteers willing to take Sunday School. The next generation of children, the so-called GenXers, were very different from their parents and grandparents, and the generation gap began to become very real. This was also the start of the time when going to church twice on a Sunday (still quite common in 1979) was also beginning to change, and, if you only went once, you didn't want to spend that "once" teaching in Sunday School.

Thus, in the 1990s, the concept of paying people to work with the church's young people began, and academic colleges began to put on courses for aspiring Youth Workers, and later degree courses. The 1998 English Church Census asked churches if they had a paid youth worker, and some 7,500 churches replied in the affirmative, about one church in every five, although a few churches shared a single individual. Has this battalion (hardly an "army"!) of paid youth workers made any substantial difference to young people coming to church?

The situation in 1989

It is interesting to see now that in the 1989 book of the Census results³ no attempt was made to forecast the age results forward into the future, perhaps because there was far too little data to do so. In 1979 5,441,000 people were counted in church on an average Sunday, by 1989 that had become 4,742,800, a drop of 698,200. Table 14.5.1 shows the actual changes by each age-group between 1979 and 1989, and what these would have become if those same trends had continued until 1998, a 9-year period instead of 10 years.

Table 14.5.1: Net change in number of churchgoers by age, actual and projected

Period	Under 15	15 to 19	20 to 29	30 to 44	45 to 64	65 & over	TOTAL
1979-1989	-229,000	-157,700	-124,200	-64,300	-44,800	-78,200	-698,200
1989-1998E	-206,100	-141,900	-111,800	-57,900	-40,300	-70,400	-628,400

The situation in 1998

However, with the actual data of 1998 now available, it is of course very easy to compare the results that might have been anticipated in 1989 for 1998 with the specific findings. This is given in Table 14.5.2, on the next page, where the first line simply repeats the last line of Table 14.5.1. The 1998 total of churchgoers was 3,714,700, a drop of 1,028,100 people, 64% above that expected from the total in Table 14.5.1.

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Table 14.5.2: Net change in number of churchgoers by age, projected and actual

Period	Under 15	15 to 19	20 to 29	30 to 44	45 to 64	65 & over	TOTAL
1989-1998E	-206,100	-141,900	-111,800	-57,900	-40,300	-70,400	-628,400
1989-1998	-479,900	-109,100	-139,900	-174,800	-151,900	+27,500	-1,028,100

It is immediately obvious that, except in two age groupings (15 to 19 and 20 to 29), the projected and actual figures are very different, simply because during the 1990s so many more people left the church than might have been expected. A better method of comparing would be to pretend that the actual total decline by 1998 was the same as that projected in 1989, that is, to reduce pro rata the various age-group losses in the bottom line so that their total was -628,400. This is done in Table 14.5.3.

Table 14.5.3: Net change in number of churchgoers by age, projected and made-to-equal projection

Period	Under 15	15 to 19	20 to 29	30 to 44	45 to 64	65 & over	TOTAL
1989-1998E	-206,100	-141,900	-111,800	-57,900	-40,300	-70,400	-628,400
1989-1998	-293,400	-66,700	-85,500	-106,800	-92,800	+16,800	-628,400

The two sets of figures in Table 14.5.3 are very different, which supports the wisdom of not forecasting ahead based on insufficient data! However, what Table 14.5.3 shows is interesting. If one assumed that the overall trend of losses experienced in the 1980s had continued in the 1990s, then the actual count shows that many more children left than expected and also adults aged 30 to 44 and 45 to 64, many of whom were probably the parents of the children who left. The number of teenagers who left was less than half what might have been expected, and the number in their 20s leaving was also less (some of whom would have been in their teens in 1989).

Youth workers by definition work with "youth", not always interpreted identically, but usually meaning those 15 and over in many churches. The number of youth who left the church in the 1990s was far fewer than would have been expected from the 1980s data, suggesting that youth workers, who largely began working in churches in the 1990s, were making a real impact in their churches and enabling more young people to stay on in church life than might have been the case. If the constraining mechanism used in Table 14.5.3 is ignored, and one just looks at the actual full results given in Table 14.5.2, it may be seen that the actual number of teenagers who left in the 1990s was still much less than would have been anticipated from, the 1980s data.

Youth Workers work!

The conclusion is that the employment of youth workers was successful, if "success" means young people staying on in a church fellowship. That this was also the result on the ground is evidenced by the fact that many churches seeing this success, but also observing in experience the appalling loss of children under 15 in the 1990s shown in Table 14.5.2, started to appoint Children's Workers as well as Youth Workers in the hope that they too would see similar success. Some churches have gone further and appointed Family Workers to take account of the loss of parents as well as children.

The situation in 2005

A fourth English Church Census was undertaken in 2005. It showed the total number of churchgoers was then 3,166,200 or a loss of a further -548,500 people since 1998. Based on the actual losses shown in the bottom line of Table 2 in the 1990s, what might the losses have been if constrained to just 7 years by 2005? Table 14.5.4 shows the actual losses between 1989 and 1998, a 9 year period, and what they would have been if they had continued at the same rate for the next 7 years to 2005.

Table 14.5.4: Net change in number of churchgoers by age, actual and projected

Period	Under 15	15 to 19	20 to 29	30 to 44	45 to 64	65 & over	TOTAL
1989-1998	-479,900	-109,100	-139,900	-174,800	-151,900	+27,500	-1,028,100
1998-2005E	-373,200	-84,900	-108,800	-136,000	-118,100	+21,400	-799,600

This time, however, the anticipated drop in the number of churchgoers judging by the 1990s experience is *more than* the actual loss of people. This is mainly because of the huge surge in the number of non-white churchgoers attending church in the opening years of the 21st century, which suggests that this fairly simplistic analysis really needs to be done broken down by denomination as well. The necessary data is available for anyone who would like to do it!⁴

Table 14.5.5 compares the anticipated losses shown in the bottom line of Table 14.5.4 with the actual losses which occurred between 1998 and 2005. The middle line of the Table constrains the anticipated losses between 1998 to 2005 to the actual total loss by 2005, to enable easier comparisons.

Table 14.5.5: Net change in number of churchgoers by age, projected and actual

Period	Under 15	15 to 19	20 to 29	30 to 44	45 to 64	65 & over	TOTAL
1998-2005E	-373,200	-84,900	-108,800	-136,000	-118,100	+21,400	-799,600
1998-2005E	-256,000	-58,300	-74,600	-93,300	-81,000	+14,700	-548,500
1998-2005	-104,200	-64,600	-112,700	-124,900	-131,600	-10,500	-548,500

The comparison in the bottom two lines, as before, is interesting. The number of children who actually left between 1998 and 2005 is way below the number that might have been expected to leave had past trends continued. As paid Children's Workers, rather than volunteers, began working in churches during the late 1990s and early 2000s this again would suggest that their work has been successful.

It may be seen that the number of teenagers leaving is perhaps slightly more than expected, but it needs to be remembered that this is a fairly crude analysis and a difference of 6,000 teenagers spread across 37,500 churches is almost certainly within the margins of error. In other words, Youth Workers can do so much, but they can't do everything. Some teenagers will leave the church however brilliant the Youth Worker. Likewise the variation in numbers for those 65 and over is not really consequential.

What Table 14.5.5 does confirm, however, is the very serious situation with many more people in their 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s leaving the church than might have been expected from earlier studies. Even taking the full expected loss between 1998 and 2005 (the first line in Table 5) the actual numbers of those leaving in their 20s and aged 45 to 64 is still greater. The percentage of people in their 20s attending church is the lowest percentage, 3%, of all age-groups taken as a proportion of the population. These and those aged 30 to 44 roughly form the GenXer generation.

We are also losing those aged 45 to 64, the (Baby) Boomers generation. It should be noted that "loss" in this context invariably means attending church far less frequently than they used to, perhaps just once a month, rather than actually leaving the church altogether. Reaching the age when many would expect to take on responsibility in the church (or Christian agencies) many are simply turning away from that acceptance, preferring a lack of commitment instead. Many Christian agencies find it very difficult to get new Trustees of people in this age-range for similar reasons, and a number have closed when the founder retired unable to hand over to a suitable successor. Many of the New Churches have had leadership problems, precisely in this age range, and the consequence is their total numbers are now declining.

So what?

This article was requested asking the question whether paid Youth Workers had proved successful. The answer is positive, but with the recognition that they can't do everything, and some continuing loss is likely to happen even if a church has a paid Youth Worker (but the loss would likely be greater if the Youth Worker was not present). The same is true for paid Children's Workers, which suggests that these relatively new types of employment will continue to be needed in churches as the century progresses.

The analysis has also revealed, however, the enormous losses in church attendance being seen at later ages, especially among folk in their 20s, and those aged 45 to 64, the Boomer Generation. Some churches are seeking to offset this by employing Family Workers. The analysis also shows that while volunteers will always be needed, more and more professional staff will be required if church attendance is not to drop even more drastically in the days ahead.

NOTES

- 1 How far this might have depended on physical provisions such as meals, drinks, food, clothing etc. in an era of extreme poverty in the working class is not known.
- 2 *The Strange Death of Moral Britain*, Christie Davies, Transaction Publishers, London, 2007.
- 3 *'Christian' England*, Peter Brierley, MARC Europe, London, 1991, Chapter 4.
- 4 See *Religious Trends*, No 6, 2006/2007, Christian Research, Eltham, London, 2006, Table 5.6.2.

This is an extract from *UK Church Statistics 2005-2015*, published June 2011, giving an update of the latest statistics across all denominations in the UK. It is available from Brierley Consultancy. See website www.brierleyconsultancy.com for details or email Peter Brierley at peter@brierleyres.com