

AMALGAMATING PARISHES AND DECLINING CLERGY NUMBERS:

Consequences and causes

This note outlines the latest research and analysis exploring the relationship between growth and decline in attendance, clergy numbers and the impact of amalgamating parishes. The note highlights both recent and longer term trends and summarises the most up to date research evidence on the factors relating to these trends. It also reflects on the potential policy implications of the trends and research findings.

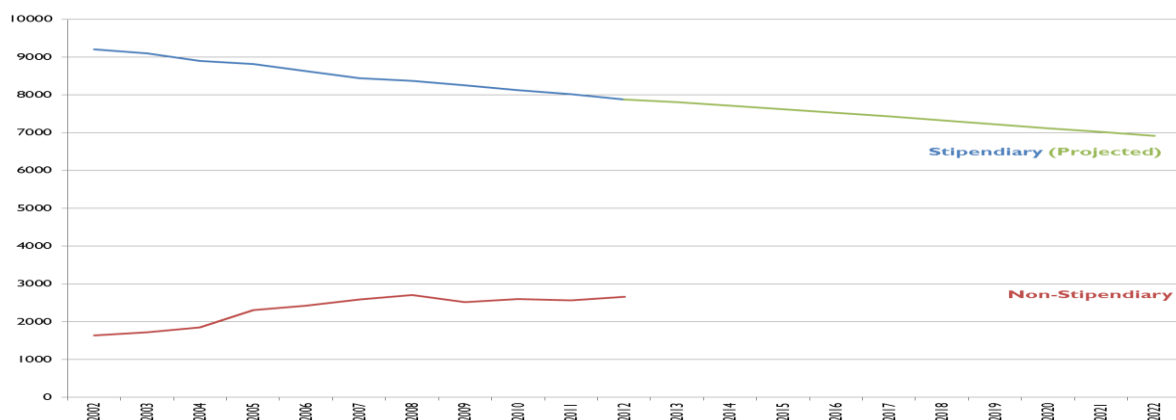
The note describes how recent research has confirmed that **clergy numbers have a significant effect on the likelihood of attendance growth and decline**. This research has also revealed that there is **no statistically significant relationship between the number of churches within a benefice (the benefice structure) and numerical growth or decline** when the effects of clergy numbers and three other factors namely: the type of geographical area, changes in the population and the starting size of the congregation are taken into consideration.

Background – trends in attendance and clergy numbers

The Church's attendance has been declining for many years. An analysis of data on Sunday attendance for the past 30 years shows that on average attendance has been declining at a rate of around 1.3% per year. This means that an average parish church has been losing one person per year. **One person, per church, per year may not seem like much but over 20 years this means a reduction of a quarter of attendees**. This has been against a backdrop of an average annual increase in the population of 0.3% per year.

The number of stipendiary clergy has also shown similar decline, albeit there has been an increase in self-supporting (non-stipendiary) ministers.

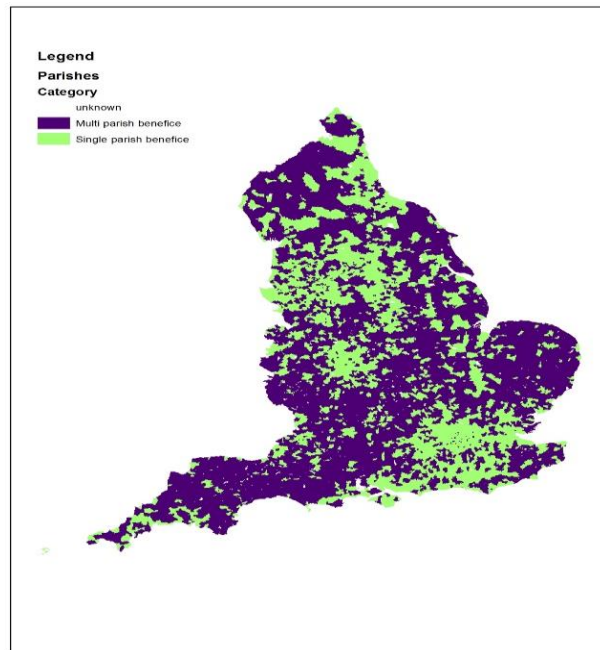
Clergy Numbers 2002 – 2022 (Historical and projected)



As the number of church attendees and stipendiary clergy has decreased over recent decades, parishes have been amalgamated to form multi-parish benefices¹. In 1960 only 17% of the Church of England's parishes were in multi parish benefices. By 2011 this figure had risen to 71%. **Amalgamations and team ministries now constitute 8,400 of the Church of England's 12,500 parishes.** However, as the map below illustrates these multi-parish benefices are not evenly distributed across England. In particular, multi-parish benefices tend to be clustered in rural areas whereas single parish benefices are more likely to be found in urban areas.

The policy of parish amalgamations has been a response to decline, but over recent years a question has been raised: has the process of amalgamation itself caused decline?

Map showing the distribution of amalgamations (2011 data)



This issue was subject to the first piece of church-wide research in 2013, as part of the Church Growth Research Programme entitled '**From Anecdote to Evidence**'. The research recorded the conclusion that 'the more churches that were amalgamated, the greater the likelihood of numerical decline.' There was general agreement at the time this research was published that there was a need for further research in order to build on this work and that its conclusions required further testing.

The original research was an initial attempt to grapple with a complex research question. A considerable amount of work was undertaken to prepare the data set for analysis, which posed a number of challenges for the researchers, including missing values. However, a significant portion of the data set was not used (e.g. parishes which contained more than one church or multiple churches). Further, a key aspect of the approach taken in the original research was to group parishes by size in terms of attendance, and then compare parishes of similar size that were and were not amalgamated. Yet, the research did not test whether or not the starting size of the congregation actually affected the likelihood of numerical growth or decline - it was asserted in the original research that smaller churches were more likely to be growing.

¹ A structure where two or more parishes are grouped together under a single member of the clergy or 'incumbent'.

The difference between the rates of growth in different sized churches is not as stark as the original research suggests. Compared to larger churches, smaller churches do have on average a slightly higher tendency for growth (especially in rural areas), but in fact only a minority of these churches are growing. Evidence suggests that the overall growth (for smaller churches) comes from a few churches becoming large quickly – hence when taken as a whole smaller churches appear to show growth.

New research was commissioned which was undertaken by the Revd Dr Fiona Tweedie, a Church of Scotland Statistician. The initial findings from this work were published in the report *Stronger as One* in September 2014. This report and the final full report of her work (published in June 2016) '*Going Deeper: Church attendance statistics and clergy deployment*' can be found on the church growth research programme website². This new research sought to address the issues highlighted above by using a larger proportion of the data set³ and explicitly testing the impact of the starting size of the congregation on the likelihood of numerical growth or decline. It also took account of a range of other fixed factors including population growth and whether the parish is in an urban or rural area, as well as clergy deployment. It is important to consider the potential impact of these other factors on the likelihood of growth or decline in order to determine what, if any, impact benefice structure has on the likelihood of growth.

Overview of research findings

It is well established that there are a large number of factors that influence church growth. We know from research published as *From Anecdote to Evidence*, that an intentional focus on mission and growth is essential, as is a clear sense of purpose, good leadership, involvement by congregations and a willingness to reflect, review and adapt. It also revealed the importance of an understanding of and engagement with context.

It has already been highlighted above that around 70% of all Church of England churches are already in multi-church groups, that is groups of two or more churches. As illustrated by the map above, the majority of parishes in rural areas are held in multi-church groups (a catch all term used here to describe team ministries, group ministries, united parishes, united benefices, multi-parish benefices and parishes held in plurality). Conversely, in urban areas single church benefices are more common. It is important to take this into consideration in the analysis as any difference in attendance patterns by single and multi-church groups may be attributable to rurality as opposed to benefice structure.

To learn more about growth in multi-church groups the four factors below have been examined.

²http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/Going_Deeper_Final

³ The later work has shown that with careful analysis it is possible to use the more complete data set and by including the data excluded in the original research a more complete analysis is possible.

1. Area Type

The research explores the impact of geographical location (rurality) of the parish on the likelihood of numerical growth and incorporates this factor into analysis of the impact of benefice structure on the likelihood of growth or decline.

For the purpose of the analysis, parishes are classified into one of the five rural-urban Defra⁴ classifications as set out in the table below.

Defra classification	Definition	Number of Parishes within this classification (rounded)	Resident Population⁵	Percentage of population
Urban conurbation	Merged areas of larger towns and cities that come together to make very large areas of population	1,800 (16%)	21,159,400	39.3%
Urban city and town	Discrete settlements with a population greater than 10,000 people	2,300 (20%)	23,499,900	43.6%
Rural town and fringe settlements	Settlements with a population of less than 10,000 people, and a population density of less than a certain value	500 (4%)	4,970,200	9.2%
Rural village	Cluster of dwellings and other buildings with a population of less than 10,000 overall and a population density lower than that of a rural town	2,900 (25%)	4,236,200	7.9%
Rural hamlet and isolated dwelling	Group of farmsteads / dwellings, or isolated buildings, with a population of less than 10,000 people and population density that is lower than that of a village	4,200 (35%)		

⁴ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

⁵https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/521214/Statistical_Digest_of_Rural_England_2016_May_edition.pdf Accessed 17.05.16

The distribution of multi-church benefices differs across these classifications, for example 70% of urban conurbation parishes in England are single church units, this falls to 7% in rural villages.

The research found that for the Church of England as a whole, across a 10 year period, 10% of parishes are growing, 20% are declining and the rest are stable. Over a 5 year period, 8% have grown and 14% declined. Growth is highest in an urban conurbation, irrespective of the size of multi-church group. Rural villages and hamlets show similar proportions of growth. Parishes in urban cities/towns show significantly greater decline than parishes in other areas over 10 years. So the research concludes that geographical location has a significant impact on the likelihood of growth or decline, but benefice structure does not.

Given that rurality is a factor that affects numerical growth and that the pattern of benefice structure is different between some rural and urban area types, it is important to take account of the effect of rurality in any analysis of the impact of benefice structure on numerical growth or decline.

2. Population Change

The data analysis suggests that population increase has a positive effect on church attendance. Parishes located in areas with large increases in population between 2001 and 2011 are more likely to have grown. Parishes with population decline see lower growth or decline. It is important to note that this effect is less pronounced in more rural areas, so that population change has much less effect on growth, probably because population change is small overall. Urban areas with growing populations are more likely to have growing churches. There is no statistical effect of benefice structure in addition to these factors.

3. Size of existing Congregation

The starting congregation size also affects the likelihood of growth or decline in attendance, however the effect of this is different in different area types. In urban areas, it is larger congregations that are more likely to grow (existing congregation of 90 or more people), while in rural areas it is smaller congregations (congregations of 30 or less) that see more growth. It is important to note that there is no significant effect of the number of parishes within the benefice on this factor.

4. Clergy Numbers

The research considered the effect of clergy deployment to single and multi-church benefices. Due to the availability of data only at the benefice level, it was not possible to analyse the exact deployment of clergy amongst parishes within each benefice. So an assumption has been made that clergy are assigned equally across all the churches in a benefice. Three factors were looked at: the number of clergy in 2011, the total number of

clergy years between 2005 and 2011, and the change in the number of clergy available to the parish in the same period.

The research found that an increase in the number of clergy over time is associated with a greater likelihood of there being attendance growth. A decrease in clergy is associated with the greater likelihood of there being a decline in attendance growth. The number of clergy per parish is associated with a greater likelihood of there being attendance growth. The change in the number of clergy over time is an even better predictor of the likelihood of growth or decline than the actual quantity in place at a particular moment. This finding is consistent with earlier work undertaken as part of the core strand of the Church Growth Research Programme by Professor David Voas⁶. Given that clergy numbers affect the likelihood of growth it is necessary to take account of this factor when analysing the effect of benefice structure.

Key finding on the impact of benefice structure on the likelihood of numerical growth

So, the new research has revealed that, once you take all the above factors into account, there is no statistically significant correlation between parish amalgamations and decline. This does not mean that amalgamations are associated with church growth; it just means that, all other factors being equal, a parish in a multi-parish benefice is not likely to show greater decline than a parish which is in a single parish benefice. **It is changes in clergy resource rather than benefice structure which are associated with the likelihood of growth or decline, albeit that reductions in clergy resource are often implemented through the amalgamation of parishes.**

Other relevant research

Although the latest research shows that benefice structure by itself has no correlation with church decline, other research has revealed problems with multi-parish benefices which would serve to further frustrate their ability to advance mission and growth;

- The burden of administration, financial management, legal requirements and working with multiple PCCs.
- Failure of multi-church groups to operate collectively or collegially.
- The challenge of managing and maintaining multiple church buildings.

The 'Patterns of Priestly Practice' research also raised some of the challenges of ministering in a multi-parish benefice context. The research revealed that incumbents perceive there to be a large difference between the experiences of those responsible for single churches and those who have oversight of multiple church ministries. It was suggested that **with multiple churches comes a greater administrative load and less time to spend with each community served.** Clergy working in multiple church settings tended to find it more

⁶ For example, Voas found an association between the number of priests or deacons serving a church and the likelihood of there being attendance growth. See the full report http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Voas_report_technical_version.pdf for further detail.

difficult to exercise autonomy over what they did and to set boundaries around their work and the time they spent on it.

Diary studies of clergy working in a multi-parish context suggested a slightly more negative experience for such clergy, such as a greater experience of doing things out of guilt, experiencing fewer positive events during the week and more time spent on travelling. That said, the study also found a large number of similarities in terms of activities engaged with and experiences of clergy serving in multi and single parish settings.

WHAT MIGHT BE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH FOR THE CHURCH?

As noted earlier, the practice of amalgamating parishes has been driven by decline, in terms of church attendance and clergy numbers.

With further decline likely in church attendance (in view of member's age profile) and certainly in terms of clergy numbers (because of retirements), what options should be pursued in order to help advance the church's growth?

Four possible approaches are outlined below;

1. To undertake amalgamations in a way which helps facilitate mission and growth

Where a decision is taken to amalgamate parishes, the amalgamation can be carried out in a way that intentionally seeks to facilitate mission and growth rather than just creating a 'marriage of convenience'. The points below offer some ideas for how to carry out amalgamations in a way that supports mission and growth.

Make Growth intentional

Evidence from the Church Growth Research Programme highlighted the association between there being an intentional focus on growth and actually achieving numerical growth. If growth is to be achieved then this should be a key objective for the amalgamated parishes.

Address particularly difficult issues relating to buildings

Care should be taken not to burden clergy taking on responsibility for another parish with the sole responsibility for dealing with burdensome buildings. When parishes are amalgamated it is useful to consider whether all of the buildings are still useful for mission. Where a decision is made to retain a building requiring considerable repair or adaptation consideration should be given to external support for dealing with such buildings.

Reduce legislation and administrative burden

One of the challenges facing amalgamated benefices is the burden of administration and governance, often including having to deal with multiple PCCs. Reducing this burden through such measures as merging PCCs and simplifying structures are ways in which the burdens facing clergy ministering in such structures can be lightened. The Simplification strand of the Reform and Renewal programme is seeking to reduce some of these legislative and administrative burdens.

Consider introducing a model of Focal Ministry

Given the challenge of falling numbers of stipendiary clergy and amalgamated structures, another option is to consider 'focal ministry'. This is the practice of appointing a person to have oversight of one Church. This was originally envisaged primarily as a role for Ordained Local Ministers (OLM), Self-Supporting Ministers (SSM), House for Duty Ministers or Readers, with the incumbent retaining cure of souls. Different dioceses that have adopted this approach have adopted different models, role descriptions and intentions for focal ministers.

Some potential models of focal ministry are outlined here. The Focal Minister could be an existing Self-Supporting Minister who becomes a focal point for ministry at a particular church. They could be a Reader who takes on many of the features of ministry in a particular church under the incumbent's oversight. Or the focal minister might be an authorised lay minister of good standing in a local Christian community who again would work with and on behalf of the incumbent in a particular church. The Focal Minister will work to the Incumbent, and within a given church have a key missional role in representing the church to the community and being a key point of access and approachability; as such the evangelistic and ambassadorial dimensions of the role are critically important and appointments to the role should reflect these emphases.

Think more creatively about pastoral re-organisation

Rather than waiting for the point of vacancy, advanced mission planning at the diocesan, deanery and benefice level should be undertaken in order to determine the most appropriate configuration for mission. Further, there is already some scope for deploying clergy more flexibly beyond a single parish or existing structure. These include:

- Encouraging occasional ministry by a clergy person outside the parish in which they are licensed to serve at the invitation of the incumbent or priest in charge.
- Giving more careful thought to which particular structure is adopted e.g. using Team or Group ministry to encourage collaboration.
- Enacting a Bishop's Mission Order (BMO) to affirm, enable, encourage and support a new mission initiative within the overall ordering of the life of the Church.
- Deploying a clergy person across a deanery in a particular role through either a general licence (if the deanery role is ancillary to ministry in a parish), admitted or licensed to a benefice and given permission to officiate in respect of the rest of the deanery or setting up a BMO as outlined in the point above.

Specific guidance on Ministry beyond a single parish is to be issued by the simplification task group.

Build a culture and practice of lay involvement

Whether or not a diocese seeks to implement a formal structure of focal ministry it is important that clergy serving in amalgamated structures are not overburdened by the challenges of ministering in those structures. A culture of lay involvement and empowerment has been found to be associated with growth and can ease the burdens faced by clergy working within amalgamated structures. The development of the Ministry of lay people is an important priority alongside the encouragement of more vocations to ordained ministry.

Providing specific training for clergy working in Multi-Parish Groups

Through Continuing Ministerial Development programmes offer training aimed at helping clergy to manage multi-church groups and develop an enabling and equipping style of leadership that seeks to grow and facilitate the ministry of lay people.

2. To side step amalgamation and instead focus on church revitalisation and church planting

Focus on areas of strength

Identify parishes / clusters of parishes that are demonstrating strong numerical growth and financial strength and focus on these as a key aspect of diocesan strategy. Seek to develop and use these areas of strength to revitalise or plant into other areas.

Grow the number of disciples and leaders

3. Focus resources on developing existing strength

Develop existing strength

Under this model a diocese would focus resource on areas of relative strength. For example, in a multi-parish benefice centred around a market town there could be a concentration of effort and resource on the town centre church. This church could be developed as the hub for mission and ministry for the surrounding area.

The focus of resource on a particular church situated in the population centre of the benefice can allow for the development of a relatively strong missional unit. This would reduce the risk of spreading resources too thinly. Over time, a relatively strong market town church could then be used to resource mission over a wider area.

A concentration of resources in some places will inevitably involve a reallocation of resources from other places where different mission models will be required (see previous section).

4. Grow the number of clergy

As noted earlier, the research findings show that decreasing the number of clergy over time is associated with the likelihood of decline in attendance. The research points to a correlation between the two factors; it does not demonstrate causation (i.e. that either declining clergy numbers leads to decline in attendance or attendance decline leads to declining clergy numbers) however in view of the evidence that the two variables move together, careful thought needs to be given to the deployment of clergy.

Taking clergy from a parish may not be helpful in terms of growth. However, dioceses still need to make choices about where clergy are deployed and there may be good reasons to reduce clergy deployment in one place and increase it in another.

At any one time, a diocese may need to address these issues through redistribution of the existing pool of clergy – to help promote mission and growth through the whole diocese. But sustained growth will also be helped by an overall increase in clergy.

It has already been noted that the current pool of stipendiary clergy will continue to decline due to the age profile of clergy and the current flow of new ordinands not keeping pace with the rate of retirement. Therefore even **in order to maintain the current size pool of stipendiary clergy there needs to be a significant increase in the number of vocations to ordained ministry.**

The proposals being worked up for the Resourcing Ministerial Education (RME) strand of the Renewal and Reform programme seek to address some of these challenges around the need for more clergy who are equipped for ministry and mission in the current context. The vision for RME has five principles.

Every minister equipped to offer **collaborative leadership in mission** and to be **adaptable** in a rapidly changing context

A cohort of candidates for ministry who are **younger, more diverse** and with a **wider range of gifts** to serve God's mission

An **increase of at least 50% in ordinations** on 2013 figures sustained annually from 2020

The rapid **development of lay ministries**

A continued commitment to an ordained and lay ministry **which serves the whole church** both **geographically** and in terms of **church tradition.**

Changes to funding arrangements aim to give dioceses greater ability to plan for and shape locally appropriate patterns of ministry and deploy ministers accordingly. The changes seek to enable a step change in the numbers of ministerial candidates, their quality and demography. Dioceses thus have the opportunity to work towards fostering more

vocations to stem the decline in clergy numbers and to **have more clergy resource at their disposal when making deployment decisions than would otherwise have been the case.**

CONCLUSION

To re-cap, recent research has confirmed that clergy numbers (and especially changes in clergy numbers) have a significant effect on the likelihood of attendance growth and decline. This analysis has also revealed that when the effects of clergy numbers and three other factors namely: the type of geographical area, changes in the population and the starting size of the congregation are taken into consideration there is **no statistically significant relationship between the number of churches within a benefice (the benefice structure) and numerical growth or decline.**

This work emphasises the importance of making carefully considered deployment decisions. It encourages policy makers faced with clergy deployment decisions (and the prospect of undertaking amalgamations) to intentionally consider how best mission and growth might be encouraged. This may involve some re-allocation of resources in order to maximise opportunities for growth.

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