

THE VENERABLE BOB JACKSON
DR BEV BOTTING



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NEW IN THE NORTH

NEW WORSHIPPING COMMUNITIES IN
THE PROVINCE OF YORK 2023

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INTRODUCTION

FROM THE ARCHBISHOP'S MISSION ENABLER:



This New in the North report is exploratory research. It was commissioned to give a sense of developments with new worshipping communities in 2023 and to inform discussions about helpful next steps. As it is based on the annual Statistics for Mission returns, this can only be part of an overall picture; individual churches and dioceses will know the particular details of their own story. At the same time, a report such as this, exploratory and provisional though it is, can help give a larger snapshot of where we find ourselves.

Key issues I would highlight include:

- There is significant life and energy in new worshipping communities, with at least 300 launched in parishes across the Province during 2023. But there is also a challenge in supporting and sustaining this life.
- A significant number of new worshipping communities are reaching children and young people, with a third of them providing wholly or mainly for this group.
- Churches that resource and revitalise other parishes are making an impact, accounting for 10% of child attendance and 42% of growth among children and young people.
- There is a great deal we don't know - further research, analysis and reflection will be vital to build a more accurate picture over time.

I want to thank Bev Botting and Bob Jackson for conducting this research, and each of the northern dioceses for their cooperation. The insights gained here illustrate what is possible when we collaborate across the region.

The Reverend Canon Dr Mark Powley
Archbishop's Mission Enabler for the North



INTRODUCTION

FROM THE RESEARCHERS:



We have been asked to see what ‘Statistics for Mission’ (SfM) 2023 can tell us about the contribution of New Worshipping Communities (NWCs) to church life and growth in the Northern Province.

To build up from the data a picture of what is happening on the ground we have focussed on the answers in six sections of the survey form. These include the special question about NWCs which was inserted into the SfM form this year in part to help us with this. We have been able to use data from 73% of the churches, all those that had returned a ‘Statistics for Mission’ (SfM) form for both 2022 and 2023.

We have been delighted to see hopeful signs both in the raw numbers and in the energy implied by the numbers of reported NWCs. We are especially grateful to all the churches of the dioceses who have filled in their SfM forms so helpfully.

The statistics cannot reveal to us some of the most important factors, for example the progress made in growing effective disciples of Jesus Christ. However, what we have learnt from SfM about NWCs sheds light on general trends and reveals ways of encouraging new life and communities in the churches of the North.

The Venerable Bob Jackson
Dr Bev Botting



GLOSSARY

Northern Province / The Province of York - The 12 dioceses of this Province are Blackburn, Carlisle, Chester, Durham, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield, Sodor & Man, Southwell & Nottingham and York.

Statistics for Mission (SfM) - The annual returns form for parishes in the Church of England, based on the calendar year.

Mixed Ecology - The vision for the Church of England is a mixed ecology where time honoured forms of church coexist healthily and collaboratively alongside new worshipping communities. These new communities could be new services, midweek congregations, new groups for children and families, Fresh Expressions or a new church plant.

New Worshipping Community (NWC) - In Statistics for Mission 2023 a new question was asked to identify all new worshipping communities - including Fresh Expressions (see below) but also other forms of new service provision. An NWC was defined as a new congregation or gathering which 'has as its purpose the worship of Jesus Christ and helping people grow in their faith. Its practices will include two or more of: prayer, scripture, praise, sacrament, and acts of service'. Each NWC 'aims to reach people who were not previously attending church regularly and to make new Christian disciples'. They must meet at least once a month and be connected with the wider Church through the parish church, deanery, or diocese.

Fresh Expression of Church (FxC) - These have been tracked in Statistics for Mission for some years now. They are defined as 'a form of Church established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet "members" of any church'. Fresh Expressions are missional (focussing on those outside the worshipping community), contextual, regular, ecclesial (i.e. experienced as church) and maturing through making disciples. Not all new worshipping communities would be described as Fresh Expressions, but all Fresh Expressions would come under the broad definition of new worshipping communities.

Resource Church - This report works with Resource Churches as a category for churches identified as having a specific ministry of resourcing, grafting into and planting other churches through sending teams of people. These may be called resource churches, resourcing churches, or simply identified as churches committed to planting congregations elsewhere.

Church at Home (CAH) - This is described in Statistics for Mission as 'any and all services offered remotely', including online services (live streamed or pre-recorded), services by telephone, or services that were emailed or posted.

AWA - Average Weekly Attendance.

WC - Worshipping Community.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PART ONE - THE CONTEXT

1 Churches in the Northern Province are not smaller than their southern counterparts, but are more thinly spread among the population, and have been closing and shrinking at a faster rate.

2 Onsite attendance in 2023 was 80% of that in 2019. Total attendance, including online, was 90%, about the same as it would have been if the 2014-19 -3% pa trend had continued.

3 There is more variability in growth trend between individual churches, groups of churches and dioceses than there was up to 2019.

4 The main growth indicators all went up in the North in 2023 – Child Average Weekly Attendance (AWA) rose by 4%, Child Usual Sunday Attendance (uSa) by 7%, Adult AWA by 3%, Adult uSa by 4%, and Worshipping Community (WC) by 2%.



Liverpool Diocese Ordinations

PART TWO - WHAT STATISTICS FOR MISSION TELL US ABOUT NWCs

1 In 2023 churches reported only 81% of the number of services provided in 2019. Congregations are fewer, not smaller.

2 388 NWCs were reported between the 2,616 churches in our sample, which is about one NWC for every seven churches.

3 The provincial target is for 3,000 NWCs to be started by 2030. In 2023, the number started is ahead of what is required to meet that target. Churches of every size were involved and about a third were aimed primarily at children, families or young people. AWA at churches starting an NWC went up 13%.

4 Many new launches were also reported in the Fresh Expressions (FxC) category, but almost as many appear to have ceased. FxC AWA went up 10%. Nearly two thirds of FxC meet monthly and most meet on church premises. About a half were aimed mainly at children, families or young people. The total attrition rate of FxC listed in 2022 appears to have been 24%.

5 The growing 'Resource Church' network is now a major aspect of overall growth. The growth in adult AWA in the 55 Resource Churches for which we have data was 29% of total provincial adult AWA growth and the growth in child AWA was 42% of child AWA growth. Adult AWA at Resource Churches went up by 11% in 2023 and child AWA by 19%.

6 The number of churches retaining a Church at Home facility, almost always online, fell from 37% in 2022 to 30% in 2023 but estimated average online attendance at churches still online went up slightly. Onsite attendance at the 70% of churches not online hardly rose at all – almost all the net growth in provincial AWA was in the 30% of churches still online.

7 There were slightly more school services in 2023 and attendance went up 11%. 55% more children attended a school service in October 2023 than a regular church service.



Manchester Diocese - Year 6 Leavers Service

PART THREE - ISSUES, IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

1 As strategies and funding decisions are increasingly data-driven, it is important to encourage all churches to record their NWC and new FxC attendance and membership numbers.

2 The churches that have declined since Covid, and declined in 2023, tended to hold fewer services, not offer online worship, not meet every week, and be in vacancy - i.e. those struggling to supply the level of 'church' they once did. The churches that grew strongly were those that held more services, started an NWC, stayed online, met at least weekly, and were not in vacancy - they were the ones able to offer enhanced church provision. Perhaps the level of core energy in church leaderships helps determine both the attendance trajectory and the level of provision. Still, in the present spiritual climate, where provision is made, people will come.

3 The start-up rate of NWCs in general and FxC suggests a high level of energy and imagination, but the high attrition rate of FxC in 2023, if reflected across all NWCs, could jeopardise the vision.

4 Small churches not meeting every week lost 5% of their AWA in 2023 but similar sized churches meeting every week gained 13%. It is harder to grow community when congregations meet infrequently, especially if individual members don't come every time. This could suggest there is value in helping infrequent NWCs to become weekly.

5 Encouraging more online and hybrid worshipping communities should be part of any strategy - with potential benefits for onsite attendance as well as the wider reach of digital provision.

6 Training and inspiration for starting and growing NWCs can be extremely effective. For instance, where church leaders have engaged with 'Leading your Church into Growth', the startup rate of NWCs has been higher and AWA rose in 2023 by over 10%.

7 NWCs, FxC and Resource Churches are at the forefront of the drive to double the number of children in churches, but much more has yet to be done to make that target achievable.



Forest Church - St Boniface Bunbury

8 Underlying the limitations on the restoration of church services to 2019 levels is the issue of leadership. This is illustrated by the number and length of vacancies, during which there is little evidence of NWCs being started.

There is an argument for leadership models that empower and support lay people, who may well deliver the bulk of the new communities in a mixed ecology church.

Provincial Contribution

In our view, there is a clear case for a Provincial role enabling the sharing of strategies, ideas, experiences and resources between dioceses, and offering support to churches starting and growing NWCs (see Appendix 1).



Durham Diocese - Prayer Spaces Taster Day

MAIN REPORT

PART ONE - THE CONTEXT

1-1 YORK AND CANTERBURY

The Province of York does not have smaller churches than the Province of Canterbury, it has fewer churches for those it serves. Both the number of churches and attendance at

them has been falling faster in the Province of York than in the Province of Canterbury for many years:

Worshipping Community (WC) per church in 2022	Canterbury 71	York 71
Population per C of E church	Canterbury 3,300	York 4,600
% of the population in the C of E WC	Canterbury 2.15	York 1.52
Fall in Average Weekly Attendance (AWA) 2014-2019	Canterbury 11%	York 16%



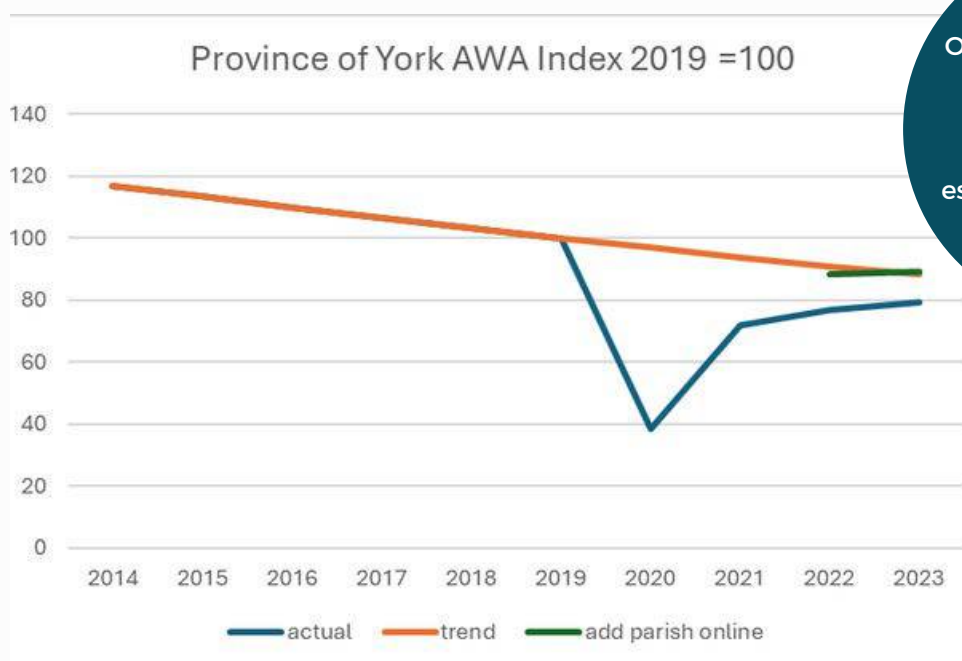
Diocese of Leeds 10th Anniversary Weekend

1-2 THE COVID LOCKDOWNS

In the five years from 2014 to 2019, although many new Fresh Expressions of Church (FxC) were started, church attendance in the Province fell each year, at an average rate of 3% pa. The whole of this attendance was in church buildings. Overnight, in 2020, all the church buildings were closed. However, within weeks, about 80% of Anglican churches began offering 'Church at Home' (CAH) services in various forms. The most common was by livestreaming on Facebook or YouTube. Various estimates suggested that these new online worshipping communities, at their peak, included perhaps twice as many people as the onsite communities they had replaced (see 'Everybody Welcome Online', Bob Jackson & George Fisher, CPAS 2020).

As onsite church services began to restart, and as life slowly and unsteadily began to return to a new normality, onsite attendance started to recover and online service numbers and attendance to decline. By 2023, the churches of the Province were offering 81% of the onsite church services that they were in 2019 and AWA had similarly recovered to 80%. In addition, about 30% of the churches had not given up streaming services online, and their own estimates of their online congregations suggest that the total onsite plus online attendance in the Province in 2023 was about 90% of AWA in 2019.

The impact of this recent history on church attendance in the North is summarised in the graph below:



Graph 1
Onsite attendance was not yet back to the previous declining trend by 2023 but estimated total onsite + online attendance was

1-3 GREAT VARIABILITY

There has been great variability in post-Covid attendance recovery between individual churches. This also applies to different dioceses and to different categories of churches. For example, AWA in 2023 in the dioceses of the Province varied from 69% of 2019 to 89%. Small churches recovered better than large churches. In one diocese the 2023 AWA of the 76 churches with an AWA of over 100 in 2019 fell by 26% but for the 56 churches with AWA under 40 in 2019 it rose by 13%.

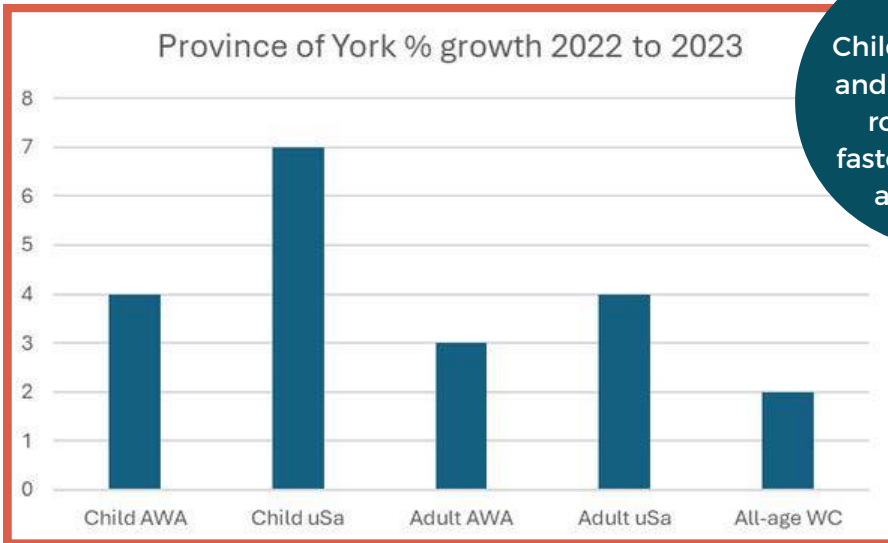
Historically, a higher proportion of the population went to church in Lancashire than Yorkshire. However, that gap has been narrowing. In 2023 adult AWA in the dioceses in the western half of the Province (Carlisle, Sodor & Man, Blackburn, Manchester, Liverpool and Chester) stayed the same and child AWA rose 2%. In the eastern dioceses (Newcastle, Durham, York, Leeds, Sheffield and Southwell & Nottingham) adult AWA rose 4% and child AWA 7%.

1-4 GROWTH AND RECOVERY IN 2023

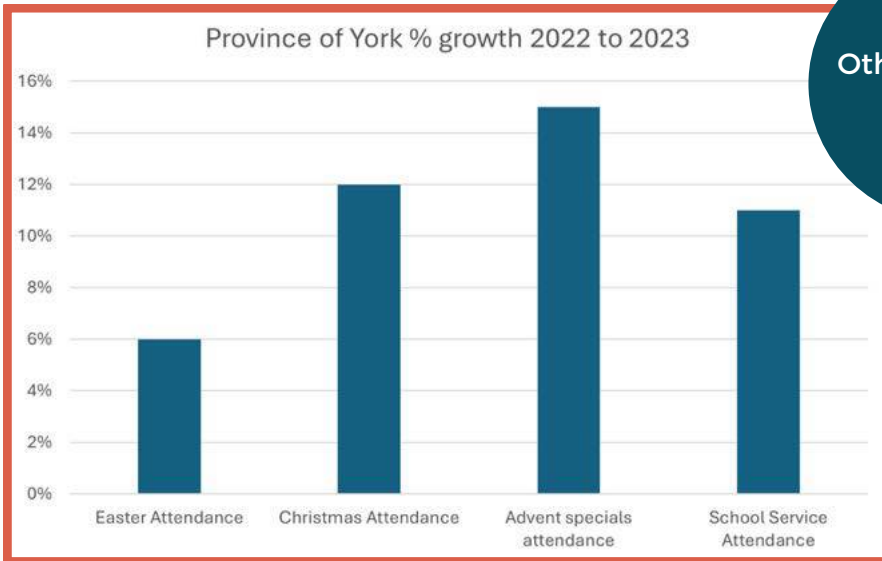
Although AWA is currently the most quoted indicator of the size of the church, no indicator tells the whole story, and it is best to look at a range of measures when assessing progress. The growth in the following indicators from 2022 to 2023 is estimated from the SfM returns of around 2,700 churches, 73% of those in the Province.

All comparisons are made on a like for like basis using the same group of churches in each year. When the final results are published for 2023, we do not expect to see major changes from the following estimates:

Child Average Weekly Attendance (AWA)	+4%
Child Usual Sunday Attendance (uSa)	+7%
Adult Average Weekly Attendance (AWA)	+3%
Adult Usual Sunday Attendance (uSa)	+4%
Worshipping Community (WC) onsite	+4%
Worshipping Community (WC) online	-25%
Worshipping Community (WC) total	+2%
Easter Attendance	+6%
Christmas Attendance	+12%
Attendance at Special Advent Services	+15%
Attendance at School Services	+11%



Graph 2
Child attendance and membership rose in 2023 faster than adult attendance



Graph 3
Other indicators rose more strongly

Christmas attendance in 2023 was boosted because Christmas Eve was a Sunday. Much of the increase in attendance at carol services and other

special services in Advent may have been the result of churches offering more of such services than in 2022.

PART TWO - WHAT STATISTICS FOR MISSION TELL US ABOUT NWCs

Against this background of dramatic recent changes in the totals and patterns of attendance, the role of New Worshipping Communities (NWCs) is summarised below, using six different measures in the SfM databases.

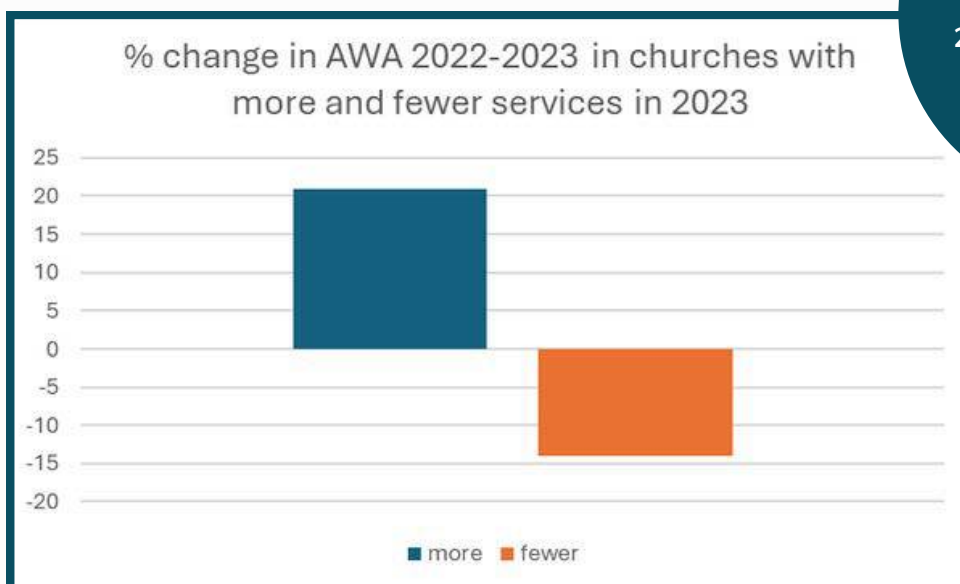
2-1 THE NUMBER OF SERVICES PER WEEK IN OCTOBER

In both 2022 and 2023 the number of services was 81% of the number in 2019. The congregations that met in 2023 were on average the same size as in 2019, but there were fewer of them. The main headline about the number of worshipping communities in recent years is not about the growth of new ones but about the ending of old ones which never re-started after lockdown.

That the churches reported no more services in 2023 than in 2022 suggests that there was no net gain in the total number of worshipping communities in 2023.

There is, naturally, a strong correlation between the number of services and attendance at them, though the causation may not all be one way. As well as churches not having the resources or desire to re-start everything after lockdown, some services may have been withdrawn through lack of demand. However, the continuing strength of the correlation, shown in graph 4 below, suggests that starting new services may be a good way to grow churches.

Graph 4
Attendance grew at churches with more services in 2023 and shrank at churches with fewer services



2-2 NEW WORSHIPPING COMMUNITIES

Partly to help with this exploratory research, a new question was asked on the SfM form for 2023 asking what new worshipping communities or services each church had started over the course of the year. About 388 NWCs were reported between the 2,616 churches in our sample, which equates to around 1 NWC for every 7 churches. If this were reflected among churches for whom we have no data, this would suggest a Provincial total of around 550.

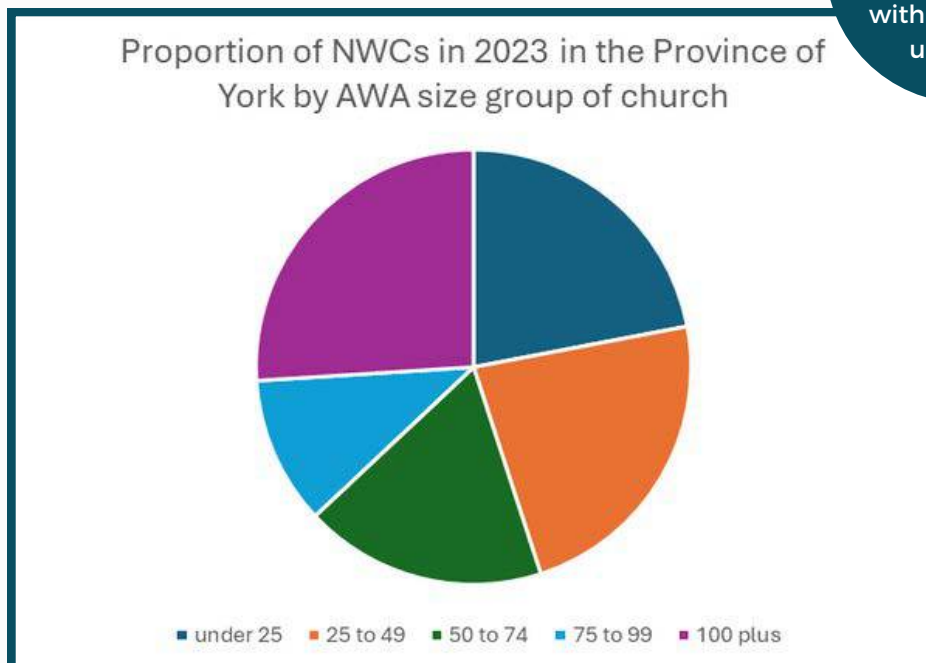
The Province of York's ambition to create 3,000 NWCs by 2030 requires an average of 1 NWC for every 11 churches for each of the nine years 2022-2030, about 330 a year.

The creativity and energy revealed by the churches in answer to this question suggests that they are on course to beat the 'bold target' of 3,000 NWCs by 2030 by a wide margin. The NWCs were started by churches of every size.

Around three quarters of the NWCs, from their titles and brief descriptions, also looked like FxC. Around a third were clearly aimed at children, families or young people.

A more detailed list of categories is given overleaf.

Graph 5
Nearly half of all NWCs came from churches with an AWA of under 50



NWC Categories	% of total
Toddler/Small Children	6
Messy Church	7
Other Family/All Age	13
School Based	5
Youth	2
Outdoors	2
Cafe Style	5
Adult FxC Styles	23
Adult Trad Styles	18
Small Groups	6
Language Groups	2
Online	1
Care Home/OAPs	10
Total	100



The combined AWA of churches reporting an NWC increased by 13% in 2023, compared with an average among all churches of only 3%.

It is possible that this difference is too great to be fully explained directly by attendance at the NWC itself. Part 3 will show that many NWCs have made little or no impression on AWA figures in 2023. Much of the explanation could be a common cause – that churches with vision and energy are able both to grow their existing congregations and to start something new.

For every 100 NWCs reported, the churches reported 29 services that had ended during 2023, across a similar range of styles. The net gain in WCs does not correspond with the steady number of church services reported. Either not all the services that had ended were actually reported or some of the NWCs did not find their way into the question about service numbers.

2-3 FRESH EXPRESSIONS OF CHURCH

Churches are asked for considerable information about their Fresh Expressions (FxC). Many FxC existing in 2019 did not restart after Covid so most of the 2023 list were started quite recently. But also, by comparing the 2022 and 2023 lists, we can identify FxC that appeared to start in 2023 and to stop after 2022.

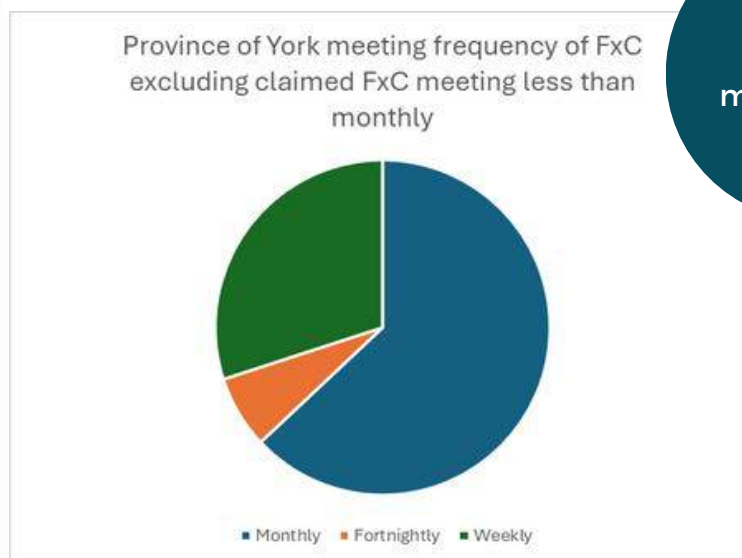
Because of inconsistencies and variability in the way individual FxC are sometimes reported, it has for some purposes been simpler and safer to focus just on churches that reported an FxC in 2023 but not in 2022. One church in 20 reported a FxC in 2023 without having reported in 2022.

This confirms the implication in the NWC list of a high rate of production of new services or worshipping communities. However, the FxC data is much more balanced between churches starting FxC and ending them. Nearly as many churches ceased to have an FxC in 2023 (86%) as those starting one for the first time.

Both adult and child AWA at FxC in 2023 rose by 10% compared with 2022. 4% of adult AWA and 14% of child AWA came from FxC in 2023. Churches are asked to record only the extra numbers at FxC - anyone attending both a traditional service and a FxC should only be counted once and in the traditional column. So, the actual numbers attending FxC will be somewhat higher than suggested on the SfM form.

15% of the overall increase in adult AWA in 2023 and 33% of the increase in child AWA came from FxC. The FxC played a significant role in AWA recovery, especially among children.

The number of people involved in the FxC is further underestimated by the AWA figures because most FxC do not meet every week. Of those meeting at least monthly, 63% meet monthly, 7% fortnightly and 30% weekly.



Graph 6
Most FxC meet once a month

Table A shows the venues of those FxC which were new in 2023. Nearly four in five met on church premises (churches or halls). Connected with the aspiration for 3,000 NWCs by 2030 has been the hope that these would include groups in schools, workplaces, homes, social spaces and the digital sphere. These account for just 15% of the new FxC, with no FxC reported in workplaces.

Table A

Venues of new FxC	%
Church premises	78
Schools	5
Other Venues	5
Online	4
Care Homes	4
Outdoors	3
Private Homes	1

Table B shows that around half of new FxC are clearly aimed at children, families and young people. But slightly more than half of those that ceased in 2022 were so aimed. The biggest net growth seems to be in care home services, perhaps due to delayed post-Covid restarts.

Table B

FxC categories	% of new FxC	% of FxC that ceased
Toddler/Small Children	12	13
Messy Church	13	18
Other Children & Families	17	20
Youth	3	3
School Based	4	2
Outdoors	5	6
Cafe Style	8	7
Small Groups	3	4
Online	2	0
Adults	24	24
Care Home/OAPs	9	4

24% of a sample of 656 FxC from 2022 were no longer reported in 2023. Compared with traditional congregations, this is a very high attrition rate. If that were to continue in future years, it is hard to see how FxC as a whole can drive church growth, even if the start-up rate is also high.

2-4 RESOURCE CHURCHES

There is no one official definition of a 'resource church', but here we are working with a category of churches identified as having a specific ministry of resourcing, grafting into and planting other churches through sending teams of people. These may be called resource churches, resourcing churches, or simply identified as churches committed to planting congregations elsewhere. Resource churches are sometimes in receipt of extra finance, but not always. They tend to form networks with the churches they have resourced, which may themselves make further plants or grafts.

We have data on 55 out of 65 churches of this type, in nine of the 12 dioceses. Their combined adult AWA increased by 11% and their child AWA went up by 19% in 2023. These churches were therefore engines both of overall growth and of the ambition to grow younger. 29% of the Provincial adult AWA growth and 42% of the child AWA growth was in resource church networks. This growth is mainly in existing churches rather than new plants in 2023.

Resource churches are now a significant part of the whole Province, accounting for 7% of adult AWA and 10% of child AWA in 2023. 20% of AWA in resource churches is comprised of children, compared with the Provincial average of 15%.

Some resource churches are brand new in the last few years, while others have been revitalised with new money, staff, ethos and services so it is reasonable to think of them as substantially new worshipping communities.



St George's Church - Leeds Diocese

2-5 CHURCH AT HOME (CAH) AND ONLINE SERVICES

Though not necessarily an NWC, Church at Home (CAH) is part of the Church of England’s vision to provide worshipping communities in digital spaces. The comments here are made with that aspiration in mind.

In 2022 and 2023 the SfM form asked churches to say whether they offered any CAH services in October and, if so, how many people usually attended and for how many weeks out of the four it was offered. The assumption here is that all or virtually all of these were online services, either streaming onsite services or stand alone. The usual attendance numbers were modified to an estimated AWA equivalent by creating a four-week average for those that did not operate every week.

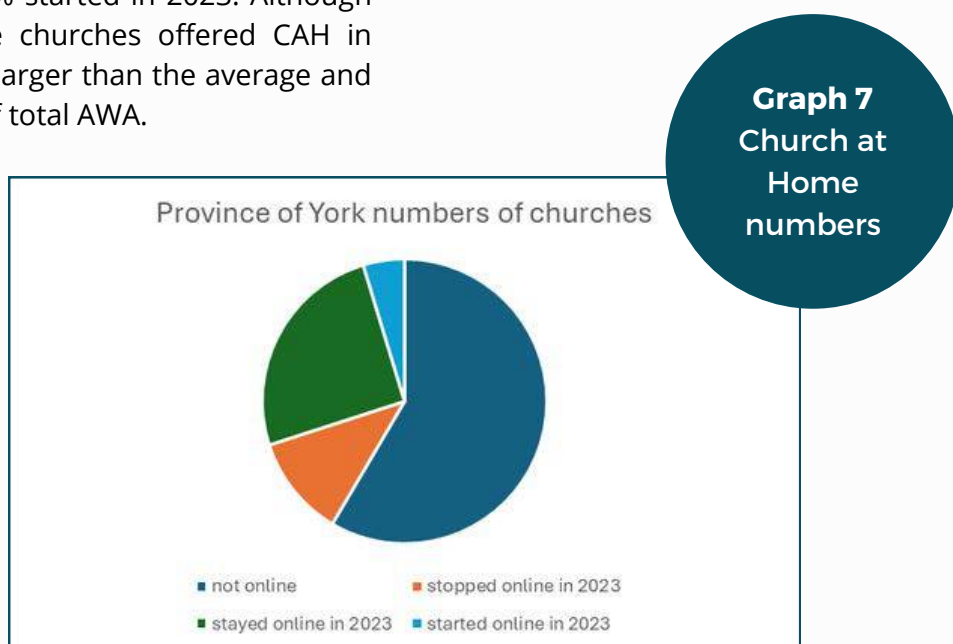
37% of churches offered CAH in 2022 and 30% in 2023. 302 churches, 31% of the 2022 total, appeared to stop CAH in 2023 and the equivalent of 13% started in 2023. Although only 30% of the churches offered CAH in 2023, they were larger than the average and contained 45% of total AWA.

Total estimated average weekly online attendance fell 13%. However, the average online weekly attendance per church was 21.4 in 2022 and 22.8 in 2023.

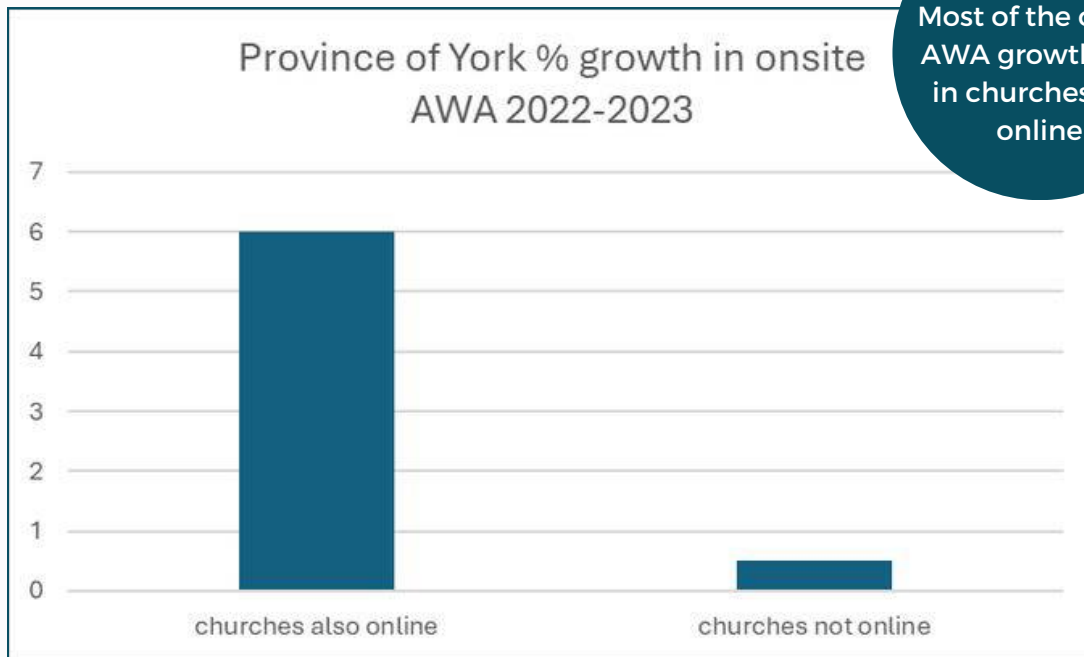
The overall fall in estimated attendance was therefore associated not with fewer people at each church but with fewer churches offering an online option. This reduction in online attendance meant that estimated total onsite plus online attendance rose just 1% in 2023.

Most of the 25% reduction in ‘mainly or wholly CAH WC members’ was associated with the reduction in the number of churches involved, but the average CAH membership also went down from 10 in 2022 to 9 in 2023.

Onsite AWA in the 30% of churches online in 2023 rose by 6% whereas it rose by less than 1% in churches not online.



Graph 8
Most of the onsite
AWA growth was
in churches still
online



As well as online attendance at parish churches, there are also two other sources of new online attendance at Church of England churches. Services at eight of the cathedrals in the Province of York can be found on YouTube. Their combined YouTube viewing number at the start of 2024 was just over 6,000 a week. Some limited research suggests that 6,000 views represent perhaps around 4,000 people attending the service (see 'Everybody Welcome Online' and 'Everybody Welcome to the Future', Bob Jackson & George Fisher, CPAS 2020).

The final element of online churchgoing is the small group of 'online giants' with a national reach that have maintained large numbers of participants through 2023. These include Canterbury Cathedral, Holy Trinity Brompton, Gas Street Birmingham, Soul Survivor and the C of E's own weekly online service. These may well have several thousand online participants from the province between them. Their viewing numbers seem fairly stable.

It is not known what proportion of these online participants also attend their own local church onsite.

2-6 SCHOOL SERVICES



Chester Diocese Missionary Visit

In 2022, 21% of churches reported holding at least one school service and in 2023 it was 22%. 7% of all churches reported a school service in 2022 but not in 2023, and 8% in 2023 but not in 2022.

So, the large number of churches with a school 'NWC' was almost cancelled out by the number losing their school service.

The total number of school services rose 5% in 2023 and total attendance rose 11%. Adult attendance rose 18% and child attendance 9%.

There were both more school services and more people, especially adults, on average at each one.

It is worth noting that the number of children attending school services in an average week in October 2023 was about 55% greater than the AWA of children at church services.

PART THREE - ISSUES, IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FROM THE SfM DATA

This final part goes beyond simply recording key facts uncovered from the data. It draws inferences and conclusions from the data and makes some personal suggestions. The aim is to help churches, dioceses and the Province to respond well to the challenge of growing through starting new worshipping communities.

3-1 RECORDING THE RIGHT DATA AND LEARNING FROM IT

A. As strategies and funding in the Church of England become ever more data-driven, it is increasingly important to secure a high response rate to the annual SfM enquiry. The data collected is increasingly being used in decision making and in funding applications. The response rate of churches making a return in both 2022 and 2023 varied across the 12 dioceses between 60% and 87%. All of them have a good enough response rate to give a close indication of the likely diocesan total, but 60% is at the bottom end of that range and conclusions are more tentative than in dioceses with an 80%+ response.

B. Those researching and analysing the data considered whether there might be over-reporting of normal church activities as NWCs (e.g., a renamed service or a new home group being counted as a new worshipping community). But very few gatherings in this category have numbers attached in the FxC column of the AWA return. So, although they have mentioned them in words, few churches have actually attached numbers to them. So, the issue of numerical over-reporting looks small.

C. However, it is likely that there is under-reporting even from churches that have filled in their SfM form. One or two dioceses with good local knowledge of what is happening on the ground suggested that a significant proportion of genuine NWCs are not being reported at all. This may be inadvertent or an abundance of caution. Also, a proportion of listed FxC that look like they should have attendance numbers (such as monthly messy churches) do not report any numbers in the FxC AWA column. As a result, attendance at NWCs and FxC is probably being under-reported.

D. An annual statistical review of progress using this report as a baseline could help both to chart and to guide progress.

E. The new NWC question has added value to the SfM enquiry, but there is some confusion about what constitutes an NWC or a FxC. It would be helpful to bring clarification in this area.

3-2 GROWTH IS HAMPERED MORE BY CONSTRAINTS ON THE SUPPLY OF CHURCH THAN BY FALLING DEMAND

If attendance were largely governed by a general fall in the demand for church services since 2019, declining attendance would be fairly uniform. In fact, there have been huge variations in attendance trajectories between churches and dioceses. Churches were only able to hold 80% of the services they had in 2019. In 2023 AWA went down by 14% in churches that held fewer services than in 2022, hardly rose in churches that were not online, and fell by 5% at churches not able to meet every week. In some dioceses as many as one church in five appears to be in vacancy, vacancy lengths have risen, and attendance has declined in vacancy churches. Churches in vacancy are currently less likely to take new initiatives like starting a NWC or FxC.

On the other hand, AWA rose 21% in churches that increased their number of services, 13% in churches reporting a NWC, 13% in Resource Churches, 6% in churches still online, and 13% in small churches meeting every week. Where provision was made attendance grew rapidly.

Despite supply constraints, in two dioceses in the Province AWA rose by 10%, and child attendance generally rose faster than adult attendance and so churches grew slightly younger again.

There may never have been a time in recent decades when people have been more responsive to what church has to offer – when it is offered. The potential of NWCs and other growing provision to grow the churches looks considerable.



Whitby Abbey

3-3 ENERGY AND IMAGINATION TO HARNESS

The widespread creation of new worshipping communities and fresh expressions of church in every diocese in churches of all shapes and sizes is to be celebrated and encouraged. If motivation is to be maintained, however, this movement needs to nurture long term successes.

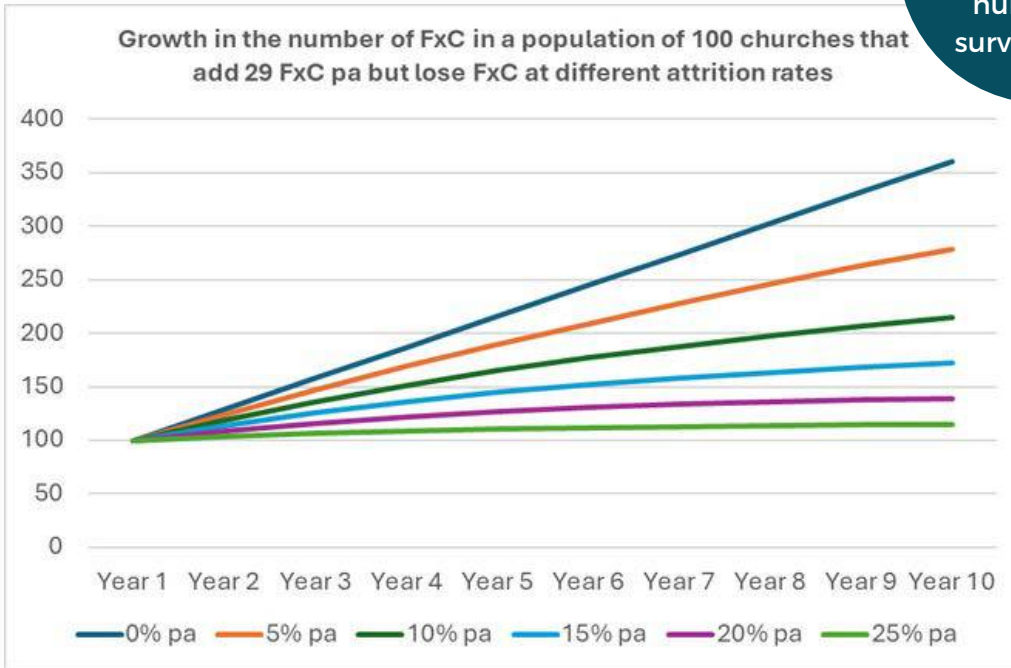
The main challenge is the currently high closure rate, with 24% of FxC apparently ending in a single year. This may explain why the number of services in an average week in the Province did not rise in 2023 even when so many new worshipping communities were being formed.

It is just as important to focus on what stops as on what starts, on the life and longevity of an NWC as well as its birth.

The graph below shows the impact of different attrition rates on the surviving number of FxC each year while new ones are being added at the 2023 rate.

There is scope to support NWCs in developing long term potential and to accompany parishes to help them sustain and grow what they start.

Graph 9
How different attrition rates impact the number of surviving FxC



3-4 FREQUENCY IS IMPORTANT

The majority of FxC are meeting monthly. Only 30% of the regularly meeting FxC meet every week. The average attendance frequency at weekly services today is little more than one week in two. The average member of a monthly NWC probably attends about seven times a year. Even in a world where online connections can build community, it is hard to grow Christian community, create relational glue and develop disciples at this meeting frequency.

It is hard to compare FxC with different frequencies as this correlates too strongly with type – for example almost all Messy Churches meet monthly, but many Toddler groups are weekly. However, many traditional churches now don't hold a service every week and they provide some clear evidence. A total of 261 small churches in the Province with a service less than once a week but the same number of services in both years saw their AWA fall by 5% between 2022 and 2023. But a similar group of 241 small churches of roughly the same size meeting every week grew their AWA by 13%.

This is important information for the traditional churches and those supporting them – leadership arrangements that enable weekly worship are also likely to enable growth instead of decline.

But it may also suggest that individual congregations not meeting every week will tend to struggle.

Putting on a good FxC tends to be demanding and time consuming. There is a good reason why teams find they can't sustain a Messy Church more than monthly. Weekly NWCs could therefore benefit from models that are less preparation-intensive and less team-intensive on at least some of the weeks. Help with flexible online content might be a key enabler of every week church that grows community and disciples without exhausting the leadership.



3-5 NWCs ONLINE

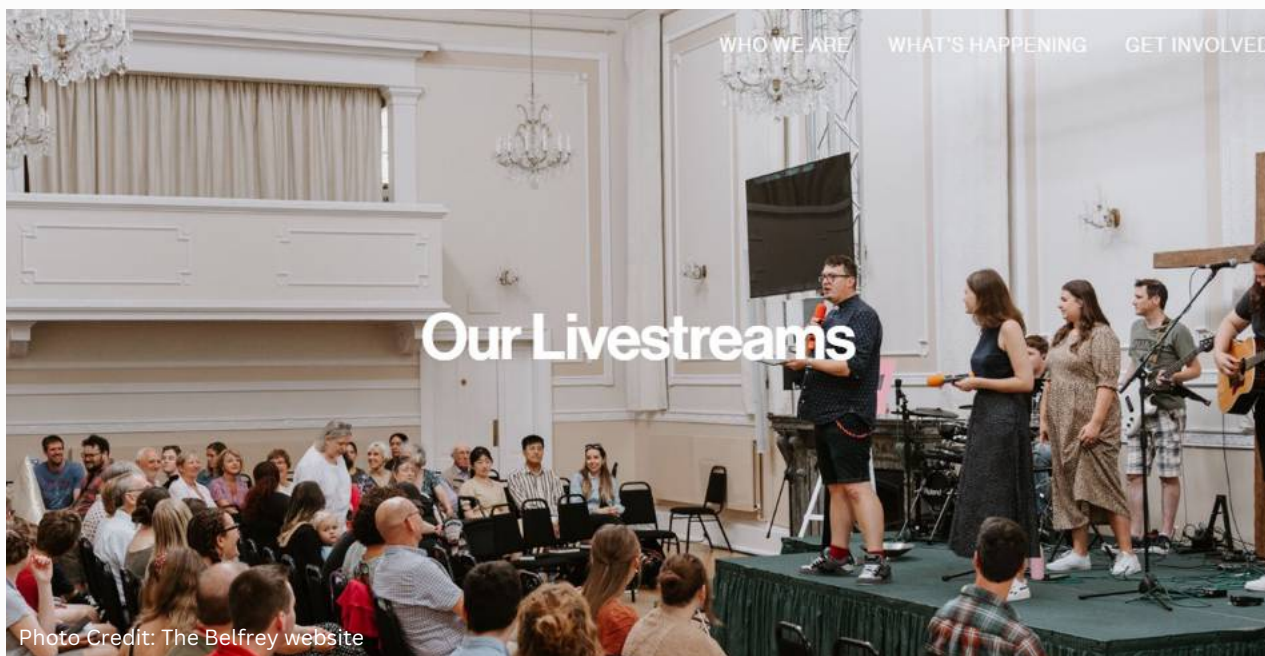


Photo Credit: The Belfrey website

Attendance and membership trends are better at churches that have stayed online. In 2023 the onsite AWA at churches not online hardly grew at all, with almost all the onsite growth being in the 30% of churches also offering online worship. Many online members are unable to attend in person, maybe due to infirmity or Sunday working. Others mix and match when they can, coming in person when free and catching up online when not. People looking for a church may no longer look at websites but at YouTube. And those for whom the online dimension is a helpful or important part of their church life will gravitate to churches offering it.

However, most churches struggle with the quality of online worship, making relationships with their online members, and the time and expertise to make it work week by week. Support to help churches start, re-start or improve their online dimension could help enable onsite growth as well as online growth.

3-6 THE IMPACT OF TRAINING AND INSPIRATION

Due to an overlap with other research in this area, we were able to identify 168 churches in the Dioceses of Leeds, Liverpool, Blackburn and Sheffield where leaders had attended a LyCiG conference between 2019 and 2022. These conferences provide general training and inspiration in how to grow churches numerically, though starting NWCs is part of that picture. The AWA and WC of this group of churches rose 10-15% in 2023. They started NWCs at the rate of one for every 4.5 churches compared with the Provincial average of one for every seven. And they started a new FxC at the rate of one for every eight churches compared with the average rate of one church in 17.

This evidence suggests that offering training and inspiration can make a difference. Specifically, training and support in the area of new worshipping communities could have an impact on the number and the growth of NWCs.



3-7 NEW WORSHIPPING COMMUNITIES AND CHILDREN

The first of the Archbishops' Council's objectives is to double the number of children and active young disciples by 2030. To what extent might the creation of 10,000 new Christian communities (the fourth objective) enable that to happen?

One third of the NWCs and a half of the new FxC reported in 2023 were clearly directed at children, families or young people. 33% of the rise in child AWA in 2023 came from FxC. 42% of the increase was in Resourcing Churches, though there is some overlap as Resourcing Churches were also active in creating new FxC. 20% of the AWA of Resourcing Churches is comprised of child attendance, compared with an average of 15%.

Child attendance at school services rose 9% and for every two children attending church services in the north in October 2023 there were three attending school services, many of which were new that year.

All this suggests that NWCs can play a key role in meeting the goal of doubling the numbers of children and they were already generating growth in 2023. However, this goal is so ambitious that it requires rapid growth in child numbers in traditional churches plus even greater growth through new child-friendly new worshipping communities.

3-8 LEADERSHIP AND VACANCIES

There is no question about vacancies on the SfM form, but many churches mention that they are in vacancy in the optional 'comments' column. The proportion varied between dioceses, but, for example, in one diocese one church in six mentioned they were in vacancy at some stage during 2023, and the AWA at churches in vacancy in October was on average 14% lower than in 2022. Also, hardly any churches mentioning a vacancy had started either a NWC or a FxC in 2023.

So, a considerable proportion of churches at any one time are not in a place where a NWC looks possible. Most NWCs today need a team of lay people to lead and run them, but also the backing and support of clergy.

Investing in the leadership of lay people may help to address restrictions on the supply of church. Models that support increase in provision are worthy of further development. This includes, for instance, establishing local 'oversight' and 'focal' minister roles or ways of developing lay leadership alongside clergy.

The conclusion in 3-2 that new growth is hampered more by supply constraints than public demand suggests a whole world of opportunities for the churches of the north. A healthy mixed ecology church will require both well-supported clergy and lay people in order to offer accessible worshipping communities within reach of everyone.



St Cuthberts Way, Holy Island

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 - PROVINCIAL CONTRIBUTION

In our view, there is a clear case for Provincial work to provide active support to dioceses and churches in the following areas:

1. Enabling the sharing of strategies, ideas, experiences and resources between dioceses.
2. Supporting the improvement in SfM reporting and conducting annual analysis to monitor progress and learn lessons
3. Offering a team to train, inspire, accompany, resource and support churches in their NWC journeys
4. The objective of reducing the attrition rate should be just as prominent as that of increasing the birth rate.
5. Specialist help for online dimensions.
6. Helping parishes and dioceses connect with resources and support from relevant para-church organisations.

APPENDIX 2 - DIOCESAN FIGURES

The conclusions drawn from the very large Provincial dataset are more robust than those that might be drawn from data in a single diocese. But it is unwise to make simplistic judgements comparing dioceses on the basis of SfM indicators:

1. A diocese might seem to be doing well or badly according to one indicator, but not according to another; or in one year but not in the next.
2. Statistical eccentricities sometimes generate unusual figures in a single diocese, for example a large church that decides to update its worshipping community list one year could change the diocesan total.
3. The settings and challenges of dioceses differ and so we would expect there to be a variety of patterns and trends.

The number in bold by each table indicates the section of the report to which it is the most relevant.

Section 1-4

Attendance by Diocese 2022 to 2023

% change	Child AWA	Adult AWA	Child uSa	Adult uSa	Total WC
Newcastle	21	10	6	7	0
Durham	-2	-3	15	4	3
York	8	4	2	0	-3
Leeds	10	4	9	3	-2
Sheffield	-4	5	6	5	8
Southwell	13	10	6	6	2
Carlisle	-8	-5	7	3	-3
Sodor & Man	-1	-10	-2	-7	-6
Blackburn	2	3	9	4	5
Manchester	-1	-4	-3	-1	4
Liverpool	9	2	18	9	11
Chester	3	5	4	4	0
PROVINCE	4	3	7	4	2

Section 1-4

Change in average worshipping attendance (AWA) from 2022 - 2023

DIocese	Ad AWA 22-23 %	Child AWA 22-23 %	Total AWA 22-23%	Services 22-23 %
Newcastle	10	21	11	6
Durham	-3	-2	-3	0
York	4	8	4	2
Leeds	4	10	3	-2
Sheffield	5	-4	4	3
Southwell	10	13	10	3
Carlisle	-5	-8	-5	-2
Sodor & Man	-10	-1	-9	-4
Blackburn	3	2	2	0
Manchester	-4	-1	-3	-4
Liverpool	2	0	3	-7
Chester	5	3	5	2
PROVINCE	3	4	3	0
Eastern Half	4	7	4	1
Western Half	0	2	1	-2

Section 2-1

Number of services in 2023, compared with 2019 and 2022

Number of services	23 as % of 19	23 as % of 22
Newcastle	79	106
Durham	72	99
York	89	103
Leeds	84	98
Sheffield	69	102
Southwell	85	103
Carlisle	84	99
Sodor & Man	95	96
Blackburn	85	100
Manchester	79	95
Liverpool	79	92
Chester	82	101
PROVINCE	81	100

Section 2-2

Number of churches per new worshipping community launched

Newcastle	9
Durham	5
York	8
Leeds	8
Sheffield	4
Southwell	6
Carlisle	24
Sodor & Man	13
Blackburn	7
Manchester	7
Liverpool	5
Chester	6
PROVINCE	7

Section 2-3

Number of churches reporting at least one FxC

Diocese	2022 total	22 but not 23	attrition rate %
Newcastle	19	6	32
Durham	65	9	14
York	45	12	27
Leeds	144	26	18
Sheffield	68	13	19
Southwell	71	15	21
East	412	81	20
Carlisle	25	4	16
Sodor & Man	6	1	17
Blackburn	51	18	35
Manchester	34	17	50
Liverpool	83	21	25
Chester	48	14	29
West	247	75	30
Province	659	156	24

Section 2-5

AWA in churches staying online in 2023

	2022	2023	no. churches
Newcastle	4,576	5,471	61
Durham	4,670	4,500	67
York	5,537	5,860	75
Leeds	8,916	9,545	146
Sheffield	5,325	5,572	53
Southwell	5,483	6,151	79
Carlisle	1,872	1,778	34
Sodor & Man	221	175	2
Blackburn	7,231	7,410	79
Manchester	4,509	4,635	61
Liverpool	4,526	5,001	44
Chester	7,762	7,970	83
PROVINCE	6,0628	6,4068	784
All church AWA	13,8333	14,2163	3%
AWA not online	77,705	78,095	1%

APPENDIX 3 - CATEGORY COMPARISONS AND REGRESSION EQUATIONS

This report contains some category comparisons in which, for example, churches with a NWC are compared with the average of all churches, or churches not meeting every week are compared with similar churches that do meet every week. Rather than simply say: "Small churches saw AWA rise on average by X% whereas large churches saw AWA fall by Y%" it is possible to create a best fit line to a scatter graph linking size to % change with the formula: $Y = a + bX$ where Y is % AWA change and X is the AWA start size. For each equation, the computer programme yields a correlation coefficient which expresses the degree to which the two variables move together.

We have not created such correlation equations here partly to keep things relatively simple and understandable but also because there are many factors determining AWA change. Only a multiple-regression analysis in the form: $Y = a + b_1X_1 + b_2X_2 + \dots + b_nX_n$ can begin to do justice to the complexities and it is not easy to put together comprehensive data sets to enable this.

Some factors (such as whether or not a NWC was started in the year) are of the 'yes-no' type but can still be included in a regression equation as 1 or 0. Some factors cannot be expressed in numbers at all.

A further reason why such equations have rarely been attempted with church data is the large sample size required to produce equations with reasonably tight confidence limits. However, for the first time in our experience we have a large enough sample size putting all 12 dioceses together to surmount this problem. Given further analysis time it may be possible to attempt a multiple regression approach and see what the resultant best fit equations look like.

Correlation and causation

Whether by category comparison or regression equation, the correlations discovered are never proof of causation. There are four potential sources of a correlation:

1. Variable A (eg AWA change 2022 to 2023) is being influenced by variable B (eg whether or not the church is streaming services online). Maybe potential churchgoers are checking churches out on YouTube before attending in person.
2. The causation is actually the other way round. The change in B is following the change in A. Maybe it is the growing onsite congregation that is giving the church the energy to be online as well. When a church starts to shrink it drops its online offering.
3. The two factors are both being influenced by the same determining factor. For example, a dynamic leadership team is growing the church onsite and online at the same time.
4. There is no commonality, it is just coincidence that churches online are growing onsite while churches not online are not growing onsite. This possibility comes into play with small sample sizes but becomes a vanishingly small possibility in large samples.

In every case there will be wide variations in the experience of individual churches. For example, within any sample of churches online and not online there are likely to be some churches online that are shrinking and some not online that are growing. That is why large samples are required to establish differences that look statistically significant.

The category comparisons made in the report are therefore offered on the basis of reasonable inference rather than proof. For example, a new FxC for families is likely to attract some new families to the church who would not otherwise attend.

APPENDIX 4 - SOME COMPARISONS WITH THE PERIOD BEFORE COVID

The Church Army report 'The Day of Small Things' examined 1109 FxC in 21 dioceses during the years 2012-2016. It is hard to make like-for-like comparisons, but it looks like the closure rate then was less than that implied by comparing the 2022 and 2023 SfM FxC entries. Only 46% of the FxC were meeting monthly and 45% weekly, so the average frequency in 2023 seems to be lower than in the past. 64% of FxC met on church premises, compared with 78% found in 2023.

'The Day of Small Things' reported on 21 dioceses across the whole C of E, and churches self-designated their categories. They were allowed to enter more than one category so each % has here been reduced in proportion to make the total add to 100. This study relies on our own categorisation based on FxC titles and descriptions for 12 northern dioceses and only one category was assigned to each FxC. The following comparison should therefore be taken as approximately indicative only:

% of new FxC	Up to 2016 D of ST	2023 SfM
Toddler/U-5s	4	12
Messy Church	19	13
Other child/family	21	17
Youth	3	3
Schools-based	2	4
Outdoors	0	5
Café	8	8
Small Groups	6	3
Online	0	2
Mainly Adults	34	24
Care Homes/OAPs	3	9

SfM does not ask about FxC leadership, but 'The Day of Small Things' reported that 45% were directly led by the stipendiary clergy, 15% by people paid locally and 40% by volunteers. 52% were ordained, 12% were licensed lay people and 36% were 'lay-lay' with no formal recognition or training. There was no significant difference between the growth and decline trajectories of the lay-lay and stipendiary led FxCs.

