**Making Sense from a Census or two, from one Census to Another**

There, the headline writers have it – “Church of England is Staring at Oblivion” “The Decline and Fall of the Established Church” “Calls grow to disestablish the Church of England as Christians become a minority”.

During 1998 I learned about the “Tiller Report”, a document written for The Church of England entitled “A strategy for the Church’s Ministry”. John Tiller was a priest who eventually became an archdeacon and author. His 1983 report was taken very seriously by the Church. The Tiller Report outlined long term decline in church attendance, it warned of a future decline in available clergy, but it also offered solutions and strategies to the realities the church faced, and would face in the future.

Some of you may remember the seemingly shocking news, following the 2011 UK Census, that Norwich was identified as the City with the lowest percentage of Christian faith. Phrases like “God-forsaken City” appeared in the headlines then, but I remember clearly the response to all this from the then Bishop of Norwich Graham James. He said that contrary to what the census statistics seemed to indicate, the City of Norwich had many active and growing churches – of all denominations. Effective Christian mission provokes people both inside and outside the church to think seriously, and sometimes radically, about what they truly believe, and where they actually stand as far as Christian faith is concerned. This important process takes place within the hearts and minds of those who attend church, as well as those who don’t. Bishop Graham James’s point was that Norwich’s census statistics reflected an uncommon authenticity – a greater proportion of people knew where they stood and were bold enough to express it – on a census form, and in their life decisions.

At Christmas, we are reminded of another census – a census that forced Joseph to make the long and treacherous journey, with his already pregnant fiancé Mary, to Bethlehem. The Lord of heaven and earth and Creator of the whole universe thus allowed his Son – his very being – to be born, to be made flesh within the humblest of circumstances and surroundings. Thirty years later Jesus began his God appointed and anointed mission - a mission local to Galilee and Jerusalem that lasted just three years.

There is no greater leader, teacher, evangelist or priest that Jesus – how can there be? But at the time of his death on the cross we believe he had just 120 committed followers. Jesus died on the first Good Friday, He rose again to new life on the first Easter Day but it wasn’t until he sent his promised Holy Spirit upon his disciples that the number of believers really began to grow significantly. Since then, in different parts of the world, including the UK, the church has grown and declined, and grown and declined again. Jesus taught, and I firmly believe, that the Kingdom of God and the Church are not one and the same, and that the growth in His Kingdom is far more important that how many people do, or do not, attend church. Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered, there I am in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20). The Lord God is all knowing and all powerful – he can work through the faith of three committed believers more effectively as he can work through three thousand “well, I’m not really sure” people. As far as I can see, Jesus never commands his followers to grow a huge church, but he longs for the kingdom of God to grow.

You might gather from this that my passion is for people to discover and express committed faith in numbers great or small. My hope and longing is for God to work powerfully through and within the lives of those who truly believe – for the sake of the whole world, and everyone within it.

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