

## **DIOCESE OF CANTERBURY**

### **Easter Sunday church attendance change 2019- 2022**

**Report from: Venerable Bob Jackson 11<sup>th</sup> May 2022**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Back in February and early March it seemed as though Easter 2022 would just about mark the end both of covid restrictions and of covid-induced reluctance to attend church services. So, Bev Botting (formerly the C of E's head of Research and Statistics) and I thought it would be helpful and interesting to ask churches to record their Easter attendances immediately without waiting until the new year. This would mean that we could learn from our Easter figures straight away. Four dioceses including Canterbury asked all their churches to record Easter figures on the Statistics for Mission system while they were fresh.

Thank you to all who responded with the data. This report outlines what we learnt from it about emerging patterns of post-covid attendance.

In the event a late resurgence of a covid sub variant meant that England was by no means free of covid at Easter 2022. The ONS estimated that 6% of the population of England had covid 19 during the week running up to Easter Sunday, 17<sup>th</sup> April. This was bound to delay the full return to the buildings, both because some church goers would be isolating at home and others would be sheltering from the risk of catching covid.

In addition, the first 'free' Easter for three years tempted many more than usual to get away for a break. For example, at my own church, attendance at the 'families' service on Easter Sunday was the lowest since onsite services resumed – just 40. Two weeks later, during the school term, attendance was more normal – 72.

But, of course, there was still the possibility that onsite numbers would be significantly reinforced by online numbers. Compared with 2019, now if you are ill or away on the day, you can still access your church's Easter service online either at the time or later wherever you happen to be on whatever device you happen to have.

As many parish churches continue to reach worshippers with variations of church at home, those in participating dioceses were asked a supplementary question – did you offer a 'church at home' option on Easter Sunday and could you give an indication of how many people accessed it? This is the same question asked in the 2021 Statistics for Mission enquiry, so comparisons can be made.

Suppose there had been no covid pandemic and the world had continued on from 2019 to 2022 in the way it had before, what would Easter attendance numbers have been in 2022? Easter attendance fell in the Diocese of Canterbury by 15% between 2014 and 2019. Extrapolating that trend suggests it would have fallen a further 9% by 2022. So, 2022 attendance of 91% of 2019 looks a reasonable benchmark against which to judge the actual percentage.

Covid disruption having in the event not finished by Easter, by how much had church attendance recovered and how much was there still to go?

### **RESPONSE RATES TO THE REQUEST FOR EASTER DATA**

The response rate by early May was around 54% - excellent in the time frame.

The sample is not entirely random as there was a higher response rate from the larger churches. As they seem to be the ones with the worst trend then the full population of churches may show a slightly better trend than this sample. Apart from that, there is no reason to suppose this 54% is misleading in any systematic way – probably the main determinant of whether a church responded would be the priorities and busyness of the person whose job it is to enter the statistics.

### **ONSITE ATTENDANCE COMPARED WITH 2019**

The main purpose of this exercise was to compare Easter 2022 with the last 'normal' year of 2019 and to see what could be learned about how the churches have changed in the meantime and about how the churches could grow and develop in the future.

The total onsite attendance of these 127 churches was:

2019: 12,117

2022: 9,533     79% of 2019

Adjusting for the higher response rate of larger churches increases the 2022 diocesan attendance estimate based on our sample to 81% of 2019. If the benchmark is 91% then there was an extra 10% unrecovered.

This is perhaps not surprising given that, on ONS figures, 6% of the population had covid in Holy Week and also more people than normal appeared to go away for this first restriction-free Easter in three years.

Although we may not wish to rejoice at 81%, this finding does give hope that onsite congregations will be more fully restored once covid finally unwinds. Plus, there is the new online dimension.

### **CHURCH AT HOME OFFERINGS**

The world of church attendance had changed considerably between 2019 and 2022 with the rise of 'Church at Home' arrangements enforced by the various lockdowns and restrictions of the covid era. Although some churches used printed materials, emails and phones, most responded with online services. Most of these began with mobile phones and laptops from vicarages by Facebook. By Easter 2022, however, the dominant format was livestreaming of onsite services via YouTube.

Now the Church of England’s official ambition is to grow a ‘mixed ecology’ of churches – attendance at both traditional and fresh expressions becoming a permanent mix of onsite and online. Onsite and online should feed off each other in a new era of fresh and traditional church growth for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Out of the 127 churches, 45 reported that they offered a CAH option on Easter Sunday – that is 35%. The equivalent percentage for October 2021 was 42%. So, it looks like about 7% of all churches had stopped their online offering between October and Easter. It also looks as though the proportion of churches adopting online at any stage may be lower in Canterbury than the national average.

Churches offering CAH at Easter 2022 by attendance size in 2019

Size Group	Number of churches	number offering CAH	%
200+	16	8	50
100 to 199	24	12	50
50 to 99	36	15	42
25 to 49	29	5	17
0 to 24	22	5	23
<b>Total</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>35</b>

By ‘size group’ is meant attendance at Easter 2019.

The larger the church the more likely it was to have retained CAH, so the proportion of church members in the sample with access to their own church’s online or other offering is higher – about 43%:

### CHURCH AT HOME ATTENDANCE

This cannot easily be counted, only estimated. However, it is important to make estimates to try to make sense of what is happening, even though some of the estimates may be little more than educated guesses. Much has been learnt since the early days when people were amazed at the number of Facebook views before realising most of them lasted only a few seconds. My method for estimating Easter CAH attendance is:

1. Where a church gives its own estimate of people to accept and use that. In just a few cases the estimate was checked and revised if it looked out of line with views data given by the church.
2. Where a church gives views data – almost always for YouTube views – all ‘as live’ views were included plus 25% of subsequent views over the following week. If a church simply gave the current running total without a division, then 50-60% of the views were accepted as participation, depending on the length of time elapsed since Easter Sunday. By ‘participation’ is meant viewing at least half the service length. Each device is assumed to be accessed by an average of 1.5 people.

3. Where a church simply said that they streamed the service on YouTube then the researcher looked for the Easter service on the YouTube channel, noted the current views and applied the method at 2. Above.
4. Where a church indicated numbers of people reached through printed or emailed service orders, 25% were assumed to take part at a rate of 1 person per address.
5. Where a church indicated only that they offered CAH but without giving any information at all it is assumed that its CAH numbers were the same as the average for that size of church where an estimate had been possible.

Overall, the estimates of CAH attendance at the 45 churches offering it added a further 1,503 attendances to the onsite attendance of 9,361, giving the result below:

2019 attendance	12,117	
2022 onsite attendance	9,533	80% of 2019
Est CAH attendance	1,503	
Total est 2022 attendance	11,036	91% of 2019

Adjusting for the higher proportion of larger churches sending in their Easter figures gives a diocesan estimate of 94% of 2019's attendance – slightly better than the 91% benchmark.

#### **DID THE CAH CHURCHES HAVE A BETTER TREND THAN THE OTHERS?**

This more encouraging finding does not necessarily mean that the difference was made up simply by CAH. Some churches have given up CAH in order to encourage their people back into the building. So, is CAH an alternative to onsite church or an extra to it? The table below compares attendance change for churches with and without CAH:

	2022 attendance onsite as % of 2019	2022 total attend as % of 2019
45 churches with CAH in 2022	80%	107%
79 churches with no CAH	79%	79%

Onsite attendance dropped by about the same proportion in churches with a CAH offering as in churches without one. But the difference in total attendance change is clear. Churches with no CAH offering had 79% of their 2019 attendance but churches with CAH had 107%. The implication is that CAH is not acting as a substitute for onsite attendance, it is in addition to it. Churches should not imagine that dropping their CAH offering will cause an increase in onsite attendance. The ambition to grow the church through a mixed ecology of onsite and online is a sound one.

This is perhaps not surprising as many of the remaining online participants will either be too frail or ill to attend onsite, or be unavailable on the Sunday morning and are catching up later, or live too far away, or naturally relate online, or who are entering church membership online and may attend onsite later on. The experience of those few churches with an online presence before covid was that starting online was the main way in which

people joined the onsite congregation. Churches that wish to grow in the future will be retaining and developing their online offering, not abandoning it.

### DOES SIZE MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

There have been particularly sharp fears for small churches emerging from covid – will their elderly congregations have died, fragmented, be unable to re-convene? With their technological edge and younger profiles, perhaps larger churches will have the strength to withstand the lockdown years better. The Easter 2022 attendance numbers, however, suggest the exact opposite is the case. Small churches seem to have recovered their numbers far better than large ones. The table below divides the churches into five groups depending on their attendance level in 2019:

Size group	number of churches	2019 attend	2022 attend	% change	CAH	2022 total	% change
200+	16	4649	3078	-34	591	3669	-21
100 -199	24	3391	2872	- 15	327	3199	-6
50 – 99	36	2655	1980	-25	454	2434	-8
25 – 49	29	1061	1144	+8	56	1200	+13
0 – 24	22	361	459	+27	75	534	+48
<b>Total</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>12117</b>	<b>9533</b>	<b>-21</b>	<b>1503</b>	<b>11036</b>	<b>-9</b>

It may be that small churches that have suffered decline or be close to death have not prioritised filling in their statistics for mission form for this exercise. Perhaps, when the data for all the churches in the diocese is available, the apparent growth of the small churches will shrink. But we have data for 51 small churches already and the difference with the experience of the largest churches is huge – a difference between an average loss of 21% of attendance even after counting in CHA and an average gain of 48%.

Perhaps gathered or eclectic congregations in large town churches felt less belonging and commitment to their church than community congregations in villages. It was easier for them to drift without pastoral contact and not to return. But also, churches tended to find that families were harder to keep in touch with over covid and perhaps harder to bring back onsite. The larger churches tend to have a higher proportion of families in their congregations. Perhaps, also, people were more wary of returning to once-crowded buildings than ones guaranteed to be almost empty.

However, some larger churches saw increased Easter attendance in 2022. Decline was not inevitable. Perhaps more could have been done to maintain links with families over lockdown. There must be lessons to be learned from those churches that appear to have increased their attendance since 2019.

Those offering church online saw an increase in total attendance compared with 2019. The decline in the total is driven by churches that are not online, some of whom have recently

given it up. These findings should be a wake-up call to churches to re-consider those decisions.

**HAVE ALL CHURCHES HAD A SIMILAR EXPERIENCE?**

No! It was always likely that the shock treatment of covid lockdowns would be a hammer blow to some churches and an opportunity to others. Easter Sunday attendance is just one day so there are always likely to be bigger year to year variations for a church than in, say, Usual Sunday Attendance or the size of the Worshipping Community. However, the differences in growth experience between 2019 and 2022 do seem to be exaggerated compared with normal times. A lot of churches in the sample recorded onsite attendance significantly lower than in 2019 and some recorded attendances a lot higher. The better trend in the smaller churches was not caused by a small growth in most of them but by huge growth in a few of them. The majority of the smaller churches still registered attendance lower in 2022 than in 2019. The first table shows the number of churches in each size group where total attendance including CAH grew and shrank between 2019 and 2022. The second table lists attendance changes including CAH in some illustrative churches with big changes either way.

Size group	higher in 22	same	lower in 22
200+	3	0	13
100-199	7	0	17
50-99	11	0	25
25-49	14	3	12
0-14	8	0	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>81</b>

Some of these changes will be for purely statistical reasons – for example, ‘We had a joint service on Easter Sunday 2019’. Others will reflect an underlying reality.

Some Examples:

Churches with large attendance falls	Churches with large attendance gains
308 – 176	171 - 265
269 – 132	
188 – 107	137 - 212
159 – 45	127 - 251
80 – 34	103 - 164
78 – 40	64 - 96

64 – 25	49 - 142
40 – 27	30 - 46
39 – 15	16 - 87
12 – 7	12 – 63

### **ARE PEOPLE LIVING IN THE DIOCESE ACCESSING SERVICES FROM OUTSIDE IT?**

Yes! On top of the online attendance at local parish churches there will also be significant attendance at services of the online giants with a national reach that have emerged over the last two years.

These are of all denominations. For example, Hillsong UK after two weeks had 8,800 views of its Easter Service and Kingsway International Centre had 6,600. Other churches with a more local or regional appeal also had significant YT views – Trent Vineyard for example had 950.

A handful of Anglican churches, including some cathedrals, have also developed a national or regional reach through their YT services. Here is a list of the YT views of some churches' Easter services at a variety of dates around a week after Easter Sunday. Where a church streamed more than one service, the views have been aggregated:

Church	views
Canterbury Cathedral	50,000
Holy Trinity Brompton	18,000
King's College Chapel, Cambridge	10,000
All Saints Margaret Street	6,600
All Souls Langham Place	5,600
C of E National Service	3,800
Gas Street Birmingham	3,400
York Minster	3,000
Ely Cathedral	3,000
St Aldates Oxford	1,800
St Peter's Brighton	1,700
Winchester Cathedral	1,600
Lichfield Cathedral	1,600
St Ebb's Oxford	1,500
Chester Cathedral	1,200
Gloucester Cathedral	1,000
	113,800

HTB now clearly has a huge online reach that is lasting beyond lockdown. So do a number of the young adult town centre churches planted in partnership between London and local dioceses – such as St Peters Brighton. But the dominant online giant is Canterbury

Cathedral. It's views probably represent 30-40,000 people from all over the world, and from all over England. A significant but unknown number presumably live in Canterbury Diocese itself.

It seems likely, therefore, that, in addition to the estimated people attending parish churches online in every diocese, many hundreds, maybe thousands, more will have been accessing Anglican church services from outside the diocese and across the world. Online looks here to stay, both as part of the ministry of local parish churches and as part of the ministry of large churches with an area, national or international reach.

### **HOW ENCOURAGED OR DISCOURAGED SHOULD WE BE?**

There is no room for complacency. Easter attendance in the buildings was well down on 2019 and well down on where we think it would have been if normal decline had continued. Many of the churches saw dramatic falls in attendance. Numbers of children and young people in churches had been falling rapidly in the diocese before 2019. We suspect that attendance of families in particular may have been far lower still this Easter.

On the other hand, online numbers contribute significantly, some churches show that it is possible to grow congregations post-covid, and it is possible that onsite numbers will be fully restored by October once covid has fully worked out of the system. We do not yet know whether some churches' attendance is dramatically lower because their people are late returning in person or because they have lost their people permanently. What has been uncovered in the Easter statistics suggests we have much more to learn about the state of the churches and how they might flourish in the future.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

1. *Onsite attendance at Easter 2022 was about 81% of 2019*
2. *This compares with an expected 91% if attendance had been on trend*
3. *Recovery was stronger in smaller churches than larger ones*
4. *Recovery was very variable – some churches had far fewer people in the building this Easter Sunday, others had far more*
5. *35% of churches offered CAH this Easter compared with 42% at October 2021*
6. *Almost all the CAH offerings were online and most of those were YouTube*
7. *Online added an estimated 34% to the attendance of churches offering it, meaning that their total attendance in 2022 including online was about 7% higher than 2019.*
8. *Churches with no CAH only had the same onsite attendance recovery as those with a CAH element. Online appears to be additional to onsite rather than detracting from it*
9. *Total attendance, including online, in the whole diocese was about 94% of 2019*
10. *There will also have been significant numbers attending services from outside the diocese online*
11. *The 54% response rate suggests that asking churches to fill in ‘Statistics for Mission’ segments early is something that works. The October count should give solid information on progress between Easter and October.*

## SUGGESTIONS FOR THOUGHT AND ACTION

1. ***Check your own church’s Easter attendance in 2022 and compare it with 2019***
2. ***Think about the reasons for any changes up or down***
3. ***What has changed since Easter?***
4. ***How can you follow up those who are still missing?***
5. ***How can you build or re-build your ministry with families?***
6. ***What lasting contribution can online make where you are? How can your online offering be developed?***
7. ***Share experience with other similar churches and learn from each other***
8. ***How can you best welcome and incorporate new people?***
9. ***What help would you appreciate from the diocese?***