

Why is the UK Church declining?

(Notes to go alongside the slides)

Clifford and Monica Hill

4 May 2020

Slide 1

It is good for us both to be with you and to share some of our thinking. We don't really like tackling negative subjects but realise that we need to face some of the reasons for the decline of the church which we have witnessed and attempted to combat, during our long ministry.

We ourselves have always thought laterally, and we have learned to turn difficulties into opportunities, moving from the negative to the positive, and always adjusting our strategy of mission to the prevailing conditions. So, in this seminar we will offer an analysis of the many years of change that we have seen in nearly 70 years of ministry.

We recommend Peter Brierley's consultancy research which has produced all the UK church censuses every 10 years since the 1970s.

He looks at the major global and UK trends for 2020 to 2030 in his recent publication 'Does the Future have a Church?' Or perhaps we should say 'Does the Church have a Future?' These are the questions we should be asking particularly about the UK.

Monica, has had many years of experience in the church growth field and has worked with Peter. She will be drawing on some of his statistics to set the scene. We will then share with you some of our own experiences and the challenges that have faced us in our ministry and still face us today.

Slide 2 World Christianity

Number of Christians in millions, by continent, 1970-2050E

We look first at the growth of Christianity worldwide and the picture we get is that globally Christianity is still growing.

But Europe, having once been the most Christian continent, with the UK being one of the most Christian countries, have now dropped well down the global ratings. The Europeans were the missionaries in the 18th and 19th centuries, North America (especially the USA) took the gospel to the rest of the world in the 20th century and it looks as though the Asians and the Africans will be carrying the baton forward in the 21st-century.

Of course, there are ups and downs when one expression of Christianity is overtaken by another and some of the older ones may even disappear. We have seen the virtual loss of the Syrian church which in the first century was a major sector, but which is now in danger of extinction. None of the Seven churches in the Book of Revelation have survived.

Slide 3 UK Church Membership 2005 - 2022

This slide looks at membership. Membership and attendance are rarely the same. Membership denotes making a commitment to a particular congregation or fellowship, whereas attendance is variable - once a year, once a month or once on a Sunday, twice a Sunday or even all day as I did!

Looking at this chart showing the membership numbers in all the churches in the 17 years shown here, church membership fell from 6 million in the nation to less than 5 million. The left-hand side shows the proportion of Christians in church membership with each group over those years with the yellow being the Anglicans and Catholics and the Presbyterians; dark red being Baptists and Methodists and the other denominations being in the blue. Note that it is the yellow group which is declining at the most rapid rate and the other denominations growing slightly.

When we started in ministry, the UK was considered to be a Christian country with all Christians belonging to 1 of 6 denominations - now there are 270 denominations in the UK (note worldwide there are 48,000 denominations with 6 million congregations growing at 1.4%!). The closure of non-conformist churches, Methodist in particular, especially in rural areas, led to a massive decline in the second half of the last century and it even continues by 70% in the more recent 30-year period.

Slide 4 UK Percentage of the Population of both adult membership and attendance 2000 - 2030

This slide shows the churchgoers compared with the population for just the one year - the year 2000. This includes both members and attenders and the overall decrease in percentage terms is estimated to have dropped from about 12% in the nation in the year 2000 and is estimated to have fallen to about 7% in 2030. During this period, the population of the UK has grown by approximately 5 million from just over 62 million to nearly 67 million.

Comparisons are odious but this graph shows the English church (the red line) faring rather better than the Scottish (the blue line). This reminds us that whereas there may be growth in one area this is not necessarily universal.

Slide 5 English Churchmanship changes 1990 - 2030E

Churchmanship is another way to measure the church. This graph looks at the trend this way rather than by denomination and runs over a 40-year period. Those with an evangelical bias have fared the best while the broader liberal stance shows an even greater decline. But unfortunately, across the board whatever the churchmanship, all churches are in decline.

Slide 6 Percentage of churchgoers and churches by Environment 2010

I find this chart one of the most helpful and interesting, as it looks at the kind of area in which Christianity is surviving even if it is not growing. We can perhaps expect decline in rural areas or on council estates, but the interesting line is the red one at the top which shows that the attendance in inner-city areas is maintaining its presence. It has decreased by only 10% as against the 61% in remote rural areas. Why do you think this is? Many immigrant churches, particularly African, are swelling these numbers.

We have been looking at five different ways of presenting statistics. The figures are useless unless you can learn something from them for planning the future. Each of these tells us something different and gives us leads to go on especially if we want to create some change. They can be used positively and negatively. But the one thing they do is accentuate the need for action.

Slide 7 What was the situation in the 1950s and 1960s?

We do not have exact figures for the 1950s as it was not until the 70s and 80s that there was any attempt to unite the figures of individual denominations. Up until then, although the state did keep a note of what was happening in the Church of England, the nonconformist denominations each kept their own figures and there was limited statistical co-operation between Christians in Britain.

George Austin in *NEW DIRECTIONS: MAY 2005* reported that *'the Church of England in the 1950s was smug and confident. His description of high, low and broad was 'high and crazy, low and lazy, broad and hazy' but ne'er did they meet.*

The 'gentlemen v. players' syndrome ruled in every sector of society in the 1950s and although this gradually lost its relevance in the rest of society, it still remained in most churches.

The 1950s was a socially conservative period of reconstruction following the end of the Second World War. There was full employment and a general atmosphere of optimism.

Sunday Observance was strict - even the swings in the park were tied up on Saturday nights so that no one could use them on Sunday. Shops were shut and sporting events were banned.

Most churches were relatively full, and three quarters of the nation's children went to Sunday school. All of the nation's children had a daily period of worship and Bible based teaching every week.

Clergy were high status and the churches played an important part in the life of the nation. There were no other religions in Britain and there were only six registered denominations - Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians and Roman Catholics. It was a very different world in those days.

Rapid changes began in the 1960s which saw the end of petrol rationing, the beginnings of the youth culture and the pop age. People began to visit the seaside at the weekends and church attendance declined.

There was plenty of work for everyone and wages were rising. It was a decade searching for a new identity that produced the Flower People, the Teddy Boys, the Mods and Rockers with their motorbike gangs and the 'Make Love Not War' culture.

The 1960s also saw the rise of political liberalism with **Abortion** legalised in 1967, followed by the **Sexual Offences Act** that legalised homosexual acts between consenting males. Then the **Theatres Act** virtually abolished censorship of public performances paving the way for the era of pornography. In 1969 the **Divorce Reform Act** made easier divorce, and the introduction of the contraceptive pill all contributed to the **decline of family life**.

Change in one area of life invariably demands change in others requiring different strategies with different opportunities.

Slide 8 Why has the Church declined so rapidly since the 1950s?

When social institutions were changing the church failed to give creative leadership. Here are two major reasons.

1) **Unbelief in the church** starts in the pulpit, not in the pews. It originates in the theological colleges and divinity faculties of universities. It is rooted in the methodology of biblical study which approaches the Scriptures from a negative, destructive intention, rather than from an intention to pursue truth. Hence the basis of theological liberalism becomes **unbelief** rather than the pursuit of divine wisdom and ultimate truth.

2) **Sociological Incompetence** is an outcome of academic snobbery among theologians who have traditionally hated sociology. Hence the clergy are not taught the basics of the social structure and they are therefore left with no analytical tools to understand the forces of social change that are driving society. The bewildering pace of change has left the church unable to exercise creative leadership in the nation.

But there are other reasons for decline.

3) The growing **weakness of family life in the nation** dated back to the 1960s. It was from that time that the values of the world began creeping into the church. The decline in church attendance began to cause panic among clergy and church leaders. The search began for new ways of accommodating the new culture of youth and freedom from the constraints of Victorian values that had resurfaced during the 1950s in the aftermath of World War II.

This was the beginning of the Charismatic Movement based upon New Testament teaching that brought a new freedom in worship, in personal relationships and in theology and practice, but it did not evangelise the nation by reaching unbelievers in significant numbers - instead they drew people from the traditional churches. At best, this was 'transfer growth' and not new growth.

They did open the door to a more relaxed attitude to issues of morality. The world began to move into the church in a big way that paved the way for more relaxed attitudes towards homosexuality, divorce, remarriage and family breakdown.

4) The greater involvement of Pentecostalism and the Charismatic Movement showed another reason for decline in the **loss of the prophetic element** in the preaching of the gospel and the teaching and practice of the church. Evangelical preachers today use the first three chapters of Genesis that declare the Fall of human beings and then jump straight to the New Testament and the announcement of God's answer to human sin in the gospel. This movement away from emphasis upon the **whole Bible** to an almost exclusive emphasis upon the New Testament concentrating teaching upon the Gospels and Ephesians but missing out the whole of the Old Testament in which God chose to reveal his nature and purposes through the message of the prophets and neglects the Majesty of the God of Creation and the history of his dealings with his chosen people.

This opened the door to anti-Semitism throughout society and encouraged Replacement Theology that is embraced by most of the new churches. **Replacement Theology is an invention of the devil to undermine the Great Commission and divert the church away from the whole purposes of God for the salvation of humanity.**

5) A new type of Christianity was encouraged through the Charismatic Movement that centred around personal faith issues and **individualism** with a me-centredness in teaching and in worship especially in its popular songs. This me-centredness is a reflection of a trend in wider society which the church has embraced rather than refuted. The church has turned inwards rather than seeing ourselves as part of the whole of God's plan.

The result has been a movement away from the recognition of our total dependence upon God, to a Christianisation of the world's reliance upon human endeavour and achievement - that we can solve all the problems facing humanity.

Slide 9 Our Own Experience in the 50s and 60s

Our race relations years

We thought it might be helpful if we speak about our own 70 years' experience of ministry and the forces of social change that have reshaped the church during our lifetime.

We started in ministry in the 1950s in a tough inner-city area in West London where West Indian migrants were settling who later became known as **the Windrush Generation**. Word of our work soon went round the immigrant communities and large numbers began coming to our church. This attracted the attention of the press and it wasn't long before Cliff began writing and speaking publicly about the problems facing the newcomers and the need for greater understanding.

In 1958 Cliff published his first book called 'Black-and-White in Harmony'. It came out at the same time as the Notting Hill riots which sent the book to the bestsellers list and Cliff began doing radio and television programmes including a weekly broadcast to the West Indies on the BBC Caribbean service.

The most important mission principle we learned during this time was to start where people are - not where we think they should be. But others such as crossing cultures - all one in Christ, and recognising and accepting differences were important.

We were head hunted for a much more prestigious church in North London - in Tottenham - where we spent 10 happy years. Far from seeing the church in decline, our congregation grew steadily throughout those years. Cliff was three times appointed Chaplain to the mayor and we were highly involved in the social life of the community with our church becoming known as the only multiracial congregation in London and was often in the national as well as local news.

Many inner-city churches were closing and we felt called to minister in an area where the church was weakest and to experiment with new methods of evangelism. So we moved to a small church in the East End of London where we founded the **Newham Community Renewal Programme** that became the largest church-based urban mission program in Britain which attracted the attention of Donald Cogan the Archbishop of Canterbury who asked us to join him in leading and outreach to the nation. If you have read our book "**The Reshaping of Britain**" you will know our story, so we won't elaborate on that.

Slide 10 Our Own Experience in the 70s

Our inner-city years

Our time in the East End of London was important for learning new methods of ministry some of which we would like to share with you.

Our call was to the inner city where only 0.5% of the population attended church and leaders in all walks of life ministered **TO** rather than **WITH** the local people - a concept of paternalism from Victorian times.

We hit the challenge of divided camps - of conservative evangelicals only concerned with saving souls, and liberals meeting social needs without a gospel. We said it was not an 'either/or' but a 'both/and' - and created a new term '**Community Based Evangelism**'.

The churches were so weak that they willingly came together and found great advantage in many ways in this unity.

The experiment of 'encouraging local people to reach local people' bore much fruit and changed relationships - even many 'incomers' who came for the experience, stayed and became indigenized.

Slide 11 The 1980s - Entering our national years

On the national scene, our first action was to organise a National Congress on Evangelism in April 1980 to kickstart a Decade of Evangelism. The Congress, at Prestatyn North Wales drew 2000 delegates and linked with Spring Harvest for younger people that had been formed the previous year.

This Congress, focused upon new methods of evangelism and church growth, emphasising the need for a unique strategy for each church in different areas, such as inner-city and Suburban, rural and urban/industrial centres - there was no one blue-print to suit all situations.

We ran into problems with the Evangelical Alliance with the strategy of evangelism that we advocated for the Decade of Evangelism for the 1980s. We wanted to start at the local level ensuring that every member could share their faith with their neighbours - (this, of course, was before the days of Alpha). Evangelism would then move from local churches to regional and finally nationwide. But the EA only recognised crusade evangelism. They insisted on reversing the process by inviting both Luis Palau and Billy Graham early in the decade which we said was like putting the roof on the house before the foundations were properly laid.

It was at this point that Cliff began leading a team of those who were seeking a more prophetic emphasis upon mission.

And Monica linked together a group of church leaders from across the denominations to form the British Church Growth Association as a separate charitable trust in 1982.

This Decade of Evangelism petered out without making any impact in the nation and the Church of England's 1990s' Decade of Evangelism faced a similar fate.

Slide 12 Our Ministry from the 1980s onwards

Responding to needs

In the nation

Our first venture into politics was leading the research for the Parliamentary enquiry into video nasties in 1983.

The work of the Lords and Commons Family and Child Protection Group, although not connected to any church, has strong Christian links through its members. The reports presented to Parliament have been influential in terms of drawing attention to the serious social consequences of neglecting support of the marriage-based family, to be seen in damaging the life chances of children and having severe economic outcomes, both for individuals and for the nation.

In the church

We mentioned earlier that transfer growth does NOT bring about an increase in the body of Christ. It just moves people from one church, or one area, to another; rather like shuffling a pack of cards. The children of believers are what we call biological growth and in the natural order of things they only replace their parents when they die – and not all children become true believers. So the only ones who bring about increase in the total number are those new believers who have come from among non-believers. This is why evangelism is so important.

Not everyone is called to be an evangelist; but we are all called to be witnesses and we should all be able to talk about our faith to others and be able to answer their questions ourselves and we are also all called to help disciple new believers.

The Great Commission in Matthew 26 is not an optional extra. The command is *'to GO and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you'*. A silent Christian is not a good witness but they can be a bad witness – like an out of date noticeboard – giving the wrong message.

In the 1980s it was easier to plant a **new** church than to revive traditional churches although we are called to both renew the old and plant new expressions.

This planting of churches raises yet other issues – because we already have more than enough church buildings. One of the first things the BCGA did was to hold a conference on Church Planting drawing well-known speakers from many denominations with much experience. The ensuing book *'How to Plant Churches'* sold out almost immediately. Today the church planting movement has gone much farther and although initially the Anglican Church found it difficult, as it already had a church in every parish, they have found ways of generating new life in some of their most more ancient churches with new strategies of mission.

Slide 13 Outreach to the Nation The Prophetic Dimension

What was God saying?

Reclaiming the Word of God

We believed that God was calling us back to the Word of God; and especially to the message of the biblical Prophets

PWM and *Prophecy Today*

It was at this point in church history, in 1984, that we saw the need for a magazine that would offer a biblically based comment on current affairs along with teaching on the message of the writing prophets, and the whole subject of prophecy in the Bible. We had recently founded 'Prophetic Word Ministries' with similar objectives.

So, the magazine *Prophecy Today* was launched in 1985, with Marshals paying for the launch and the first year's support. Within three years it was the bestselling Christian magazine in the country which showed the hunger for biblically-based prophetic teaching to give an understanding of the times in which we are living.

Charismatic Movement

On the world scene the 1980s saw a rapid increase of Pentecostalism and the Charismatic Movement led to the formation of new churches. When the charismatic movement spread worldwide, many of the Western nations took the spiritual gifts for themselves and did not understand that the real reason for the gifts was to equip the church to fulfil the Great Commission. They got it right in Singapore - we were there during the renewal awakening and they knew the gifts were for service and took the gospel to their neighbours in South East Asia.

But in many of the newer churches in the western world, there was a rise of teaching that lacked biblical foundations. Doctrine and biblical theology were rapidly replaced by the emphasis upon **experience**. Inevitably prophecy suffered from this as the emphasis changed from declaring the word of God for our times to popular predictions of revival.

Then the **Kansas City Prophets** brought a new dimension of prophecy with an emphasis upon personal messages of encouragement for individuals. In our view this trivialised prophecy and moved it away from the awesome declaration of the word of God for our times.

The Toronto Blessing

The biblical basis of mission was further eroded in 1994 by the **Toronto Blessing** that brought many wild excesses of exuberance into churches of all denominations, while others embraced new-age teachings that allowed the spirit of the age to weaken any kind of biblical/prophetic impact of the gospel at a time of radical social change in the nation.

Slide 14 Outreach to the church - Understanding Mission

This was a time when growth and decline were seen alongside each other with the traditional churches continuing to decline alongside the expansion of many new churches by transfer. We needed to bring evangelism back into the picture in our churches concentrating on different kinds of evangelism and church planting in a way that would be heard and embraced.

Then the need for discipling by teaching and nurturing would follow recognising that spiritual gifts are not just a prerogative of the leaders or certain individuals. We all have gifts which should also be recognised by others. We need to practice **Whole Body Ministry**.

One of the major challenges we need to face is to remove the hindrances often to be found in churches - in both leadership and laity.

We need to affirm small churches and help them build up - the Lord must like the small church - there are so many of them!

Another difficulty to challenge, but very necessary, was to change the mindset of both leaders and laity and help them think beyond their current understanding. When we were discovering new insights in the 80s we jointly established the Centre for Contemporary Ministry to run in-service training courses for clergy. Clergy were often the 'stopper in the bottle' and we felt it important rather than just criticise them, to help them to think laterally.

Our two most popular courses were 'Gaining a Wider Vision' and 'Turning Vision into Strategy' but we did others on 'Pastoral Counselling' and 'Spiritual Gifts' and a number of other subjects. It was interesting that,

more often than not, clergy who came on these courses were at the end of their tether and just about to leave the ministry – we were their last call for help! What a privilege but also a responsibility. Sharing their experiences with others in similar situations helped and it also gave an outlet for thinking and new research.

We wanted churches to be able to manage change and we cooperated in Natural Church Development which encourages Healthy Churches and identifies the way that 8 quality characteristics interact and can build up the weakest link.

Empowering Leadership

Gift orientated ministry

Passionate spirituality

Functional structures

Inspiring worship services

Holistic Small groups

Need orientated evangelism

Loving relationships

Slide 15 Outreach in the nation

Making the Christian voice heard in Society

Transforming Society

We have always been fully committed to a gospel of personal salvation and to a policy of social action. We saw this as the policy pursued by Wilberforce and the Clapham Group who not only succeeded in abolishing slavery, but also worked for the transformation of the moral and spiritual life of the nation as well as changing social conditions. We discussed this at length with Archbishop Rowan Williams and had numerous meetings with Christians in both Houses of Parliament who were keen to follow a similar policy.

Out of these talks in 2003 we founded an organisation called Transform UK which in turn founded the group called ‘Christians in the Workplace’ which by 2005 was affiliated with 85 Christian associations in the professions, commerce and industry. Today, it is active right across the country including groups of praying Christians in industry and commerce and in most Local Government offices and departments in Westminster and Whitehall including 10 Downing Street. Its objective is not only to pray, but to find ways of making the gospel influential in the workplace. Its work is very much behind-the-scenes and it avoids publicity, but it is growing in influence across Britain. This is the true ecclesia of the Lord Jesus at work in the nation.

Social Justice The Zong Project of bringing a replica 18th-century slave ship into London was our part of the commemorations of the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade in 2007. A service in Westminster Abbey and many other projects throughout the UK gave Christians the opportunity of expressing their horror of the grave injustices and cruelties shown to Africans who were victims of colonial slavery.

Its work is continued today by ‘The Movement for Justice and Reconciliation’ who support work among Caribbean and other black minority groups, particularly young people in inner-city areas. Other parachurch organisations such as the ‘Barnabas Trust’ and ‘Voice for Justice’ give expression to biblically-based concern for issues of social justice, especially among minority groups that are often overlooked in wider society. They give expression to biblical truths that are often neglected in mainline denominational churches.

Politics Our work with Parliament to encourage change in laws to become more biblical and ethical expanded considerably.

Slide 16 The Impact of Cultural Change

The attack upon the marriage-based family in Britain increased steadily from the year 2000: the spread of LGBT teaching in schools and Marxist humanist culture driving political policy led to the legalisation of same-sex marriage and the recognition of gender change.

While all this socio-political change was taking place, the influence of the church upon the affairs of the nation grew weaker. Looking back in hindsight to the 50-year period of social change from the 1960s we see:

1. Charismatics busy falling about laughing and prophesying imminent revival.
2. Bible believing Christians busy trying to defend the faith from false teaching.
3. Liberal church leaders only too happy to go along with current culture change.
4. Conservative evangelicals running for cover - inside the book!
5. Traditional middle-of-the-road Church leaders bewildered by the rapid changes in society, the loss of professional prestige of the clergy, and the rise of unbelief.
6. The result has been a silent church.

This brings us up to the present situation

Slide 17 What is Happening Today

We are now at a crucial moment in the history of our nation. In our ministry, we have been a lone voice for many years warning that the time was coming when God would shake the nation. We received this message as far back as 1986 at a conference on Israel seeking the word of God for our times when we were drawn to Haggai 2:6 -7 that God was going to shake all nations with a global pandemic unless there was repentance and turning.

The church has to take the opportunity presented by this pandemic to change its fundamental mindset from the performance of traditional programs of worship and ritual activities to devoting all its energies into getting the gospel out into the public arena.

The great shaking is with us now and the national lockdown is a time for each nation to reflect upon its values and the way in which we have deflected from the truth of the word of God.

Now is the time for the church to come back to its foundational mission and the fulfilment of the great commission. There needs to be a fundamental change in the raison d'être of the church or it has no future. Jesus did not only tell his disciples to take the gospel to all nations in Matthew 28 but he also gave them a strategy for evangelism in Acts 1.8. It is essential that we now clarify the vision and then move from vision into strategy.

The gospel needs to be presented as the only answer to the needs of transforming society and overcoming the gross inequalities that prevent the vast majority of people from fulfilling their potential in life.

This means working on programs of social justice in conformity with the values of the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed. It means Christians getting involved in politics and openly declaring the word of God by quoting the Bible in Parliament and in the public square and not being afraid of ridicule and opposition which will inevitably come.

We have to expect persecution and actually rejoice when there is opposition which gives us a platform for declaring the truth.

We also have to make our witness with other religions in the nation and take our stand on the words of Jesus that there is no other way to the Father other than through him. This will inevitably bring us into conflict with Islam but declaring the truth is the only way of bringing salvation to those who are blinded by false religion.

Slide 18 What is Your Experience - what will you do?

The Wake Up Call

The church has been asleep and apathetic symbolised thus

1. They will not know they are asleep until they wake up
2. They do things in their sleep they would not do if they were awake
3. They hate the sound of an alarm!

What will you do in the years ahead? Are you reading the signs right? What can we do about it together?