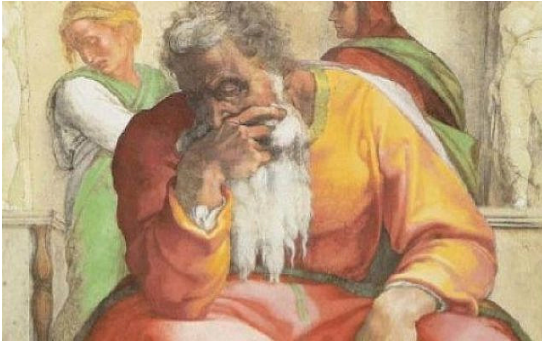


A Lament for the Church of England



Oh that my head were waters,
and my eyes a fountain of tears,
that I might weep day and night
for the slain of the daughter
of my people! (*Jeremiah 9.1*)

The roads to Zion mourn,
for no one comes to her appointed festivals.
All her gateways are desolate,
her priests groan, her young women grieve,
and she is in bitter anguish.
(*Lamentations 1.4*)



I believe in the Church, because I believe in God the Father, who called us to be his people from eternity, and in Jesus Christ His Son, who redeemed us from sin and death by his cross and resurrection, and in the Holy Spirit, who fills us, sanctifies and empowers us for His service.

Every Sunday we declare in the Creed: *We believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic Church.*

The Church of God is the body of Christ, his visible presence on earth, a living Temple with firm foundations; one day she will be revealed as the spotless Bride, but the church through history has often been seen in less attractive dress- as a cruel Crusader, a proud prince, or harsh magistrate, quarrelsome or corrupt, far from spotless and pure.

I have been a member of the Church of England since my baptism as an infant, and have loved many aspects of its life. I was captivated by the beauty of the hymns, chanted psalms and anthems I sang as a choirboy, and after I came to a personal and living faith in Jesus, I began to appreciate the rich biblical truths of its Articles and liturgy. I have served as an ordained minister for almost 30 years, and value the opportunities for pastoral care, mission and evangelism to the local community through the parochial system, but I have also been deeply grieved by its numerical decline and spiritual decay.

Samuel Stone wrote "The Church's One Foundation" in 1866, in response to a schism in the Anglican Church of South Africa. He reminds us that Jesus is the one sure foundation of the church, and also laments the current distress in the church in the third verse, sadly now omitted from our hymn book (Hymns Old & New)

Though with a scornful wonder
Men see her sore oppressed,
By schisms rent asunder,
By heresies distressed,
Yet saints their watch are keeping;
Their cry goes up, "How long?"
And soon the night of weeping
Shall be the morn of song.

The prophets and psalmists of the Old Testament were inspired by God to lament the state of God's people in their time, and I believe that the Lord wants us to lament the state of our Church today.

Let me explain what 'lament' does, and does not mean.

Lament is not the same as grumbling against God (which is a sin, as shown in Exodus 16 and Numbers 14), nor is it a despairing obituary on God's plan for his people. It is "the cry of the saints- "How long?"

In its full biblical sense lament is an act of faith in God, and a cry for understanding, recognising the disparity between what God's people should be, and their current state. Almost 40% of the Psalms are classified as personal or corporate laments. Many prophets raised laments in their writings over national disasters- famines, invasions. The Book of Lamentations is a sustained lament over the fall of Jerusalem in 587BC, the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the Jewish people.

Lament honestly recognises the current situation and cries out to God, reminding the Lord of his promises to his people. Lament is not self-indulgent pity, but concern for the glory of God; when God's people are disgraced, God's glory is diminished.

So I invite you to read and join in lament, which may lead us to confess our responsibility for the situation, and to pray for God to revive and renew his church.

Jesus promises: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." (Mt 5.4). It is interesting to note how often the psalms of Lament end with renewed hope and praise of God.

Why should we lament the state of the Church of England (CoE)?

The CoE is not the same as the Church of God: it is an ancient part of it, but not the whole, even in England, where there are many other denominations and churches, some of which are thriving.

Others before us have lamented; Gildas the Wise wrote a lament "On the ruin of Britain" in about 550AD, when the christianised Romano-Britons were being overrun by the pagan Saxons. Others lamented the break from Rome at the Reformation. Dr Thomas Arnold said in 1832: "The Church, as it now stands, no human power can save." If we care about the CoE, we can lament its decline, without necessarily despairing of the future.

There is a current flurry of articles and negative headlines about the CoE in papers like the Daily Telegraph and Times and the Spectator magazine. The New Statesman published an obituary for the methodist Church on 20 March 2024, and I will refer to some of these, and note their inaccuracies.

You may be tempted to blame individuals (the vicar, the Diocese, the PCC) for the local problems you see, but I want you to grasp the wider picture of decline, which I have summarised under 6 headings:

1. Culture Change: the end of Christendom
2. Loss of Gospel Confidence:
3. Financial Pressures
4. Burden of Buildings
5. Collapse of Ministry
6. Congregational Decline

1. Culture Change: the end of Christendom

When the 2021 Census results were released

on 30 November 2022, a number of papers had headlines like "Less than half of population is Christian", "UK Christians in minority for first time since the Dark Ages".



The 2021 census statistics for Bovey ward were 48.7% Christian, 43.5% no religion, and the rest mostly didn't answer the question on religion.

It is important to distinguish this residual sense of Christian identity, 'cultural Christianity' (48%) from those who actually worship regularly in any Christian church (5%).

This decline has almost nothing to do with mass immigration. It is the white, indigenous population who no longer choose to call themselves Christian, at

a rate of 12% per decade. (71% in 2001, 59% in 2011, 46% in 2021), and choose instead the label 'no religion' (or 'nones'). Some are choosing to reject an identity they previously held, but many are from new generations with no church connection. The loss of national Christian identity is sometimes reflected in silly headlines about Hot Cross Buns and Easter eggs, but more seriously in the plummeting numbers of weddings, baptisms and funerals. We are no longer the default choice for such 'life events'.

There are many historical reasons for this change. The legacy of Christendom sometimes left a bitter taste, when church attendance and payment of tithes was enforced by law, and periods when Jews, Catholics, Dissenters, and ethnic minorities suffered discrimination.

Our internal divisions baffle the outside world. We have been slow to respond to the intellectual challenges of the Enlightenment, Biblical Criticism, Darwin and Freud, and to the massive social changes of first the Industrial Revolution and now the Sexual Revolution, the trauma of war in the 20th Century, and the seduction of materialism. Safeguarding scandals have tainted every church tradition and denomination. We should not be surprised at widespread disenchantment.

This culture shift brings a change of attitude towards the Church (especially the CoE). We are no longer automatically respectable, even if ineffectual, but unknown and suspect, though religious 'nones' still like the Christians they know personally.

The Church of England has been structured geographically into dioceses

and parishes in order to provide pastoral care to every community in a historically christian society. The culture shift leaves the Church of England struggling to articulate its mission against indifference and an increasingly aggressive secularism, which seeks to impose its own new ideologies and orthodoxies, largely unaware of how many of its values have Christian roots, which cannot be long sustained without the parent plant.

2. A loss of confidence in the

gospel: the church in every age has struggled with disagreement and disbelief in various forms. The social and intellectual changes noted above shook our confidence in the truth and relevance of the Bible and the Creeds. CS Lewis lamented in the 1940s that the clergy often seemed to believe less of the Creed than the people in the pew, and by the 1980s society had noticed: think of 'Nine o'clock News' sketches or "Yes Prime Minister" appointing bishops who didn't believe anything. Thankfully, that tide has now turned. Even our most progressive bishops today no longer publicly deny the creeds.

Christians have sometimes created a false dichotomy between social engagement and evangelism: both are part of our mission to all of creation, but there is a noticeable reluctance or inability to articulate why the message of Jesus is vital news that must urgently be preached to all.

The churches that are growing in England - Pentecostal, Charismatic, Evangelical, and Orthodox -have a passion to reach a lost and hurting world, to serve the needy, and to call people to repent of sin and put their faith in Christ. The churches in decline, including the Church of England, speak

more blandly of God's benevolence, and their agendas seem to keep in closer step with popular secular themes - climate change, racism, identity politics, often influenced by anti-Christian ideologies such as Critical Race Theory. A recent advert recruiting a Church Officer in Birmingham for 'Deconstructing Whiteness' made the headlines, as did confusion about making reparations for the Church's investments in the vile 18th Century Slave Trade. We are not able even to commend with confidence those Christian values that are for the good of all in society - the sanctity of life from beginning to end, and the benefits of marriage. This loss of confidence from the centre saps morale, and this leads us to the immediate pressures affecting the viability of the Church of England

3. Financial Pressures:

Parish churches largely depend on regular givers, whose number nationally has fallen by 30% since 2013 to 401,000 in 2022: despite real generosity (the average weekly gift is now £16.20 nationally, £14.10 in Exeter) overall giving is now failing to keep pace with inflation, and nationally parish share contributions to Dioceses are down by 17% since 2019. Dioceses now face a £200M deficit in the 2024-2027 period, and some will soon be bankrupt, without national support.

Exeter Diocese faces a £2.5M deficit in 2024, against unrestricted reserves of £7.2M.

Yet the Church of England is widely perceived to be rich: the Church Commissioners manage an endowment fund worth £10.3 billion in 2022 which generated £186 million to support dioceses and cathedrals, and £117M towards clergy pensions. Exeter Diocese has restricted reserves of £122M, of which half (£58.6M) is the

value of vicarages, and the rest is in restricted funds.

4. Burden of Buildings:



The English landscape has been dominated by church buildings for a thousand years. They bear silent witness to the faith of previous generations and to the glory of God, but in recent decades many chapels and city churches have been demolished or converted to secular use. Some churches stand alone in fields and on hills, the original settlements having disappeared, and many of those still in use pose a heavy burden on the small congregations struggling to maintain them to the standards demanded by heritage organisations, who also resist the changes needed to make them places of warmth and welcome for the local community.

Church buildings are often valued by local communities, and strong passions are stirred when buildings are threatened with closure. **Save the Parish** monitor these closure rates closely.

Only one church building in Devon was closed last year (Petrockstowe): the Diocese is understandably reluctant to take on the financial responsibility for a redundant building, when there is no longer a PCC to maintain them.

5. Collapse of Ordained Ministry:



The Church of England has long been aware of the problem posed by the imminent retirement of a large cohort of ageing clergy, and real progress in increasing the number of ordinations was made in the mid 2010s. But since 2019 the number of those training has fallen by 40%. Those now being ordained are usually older, and will therefore have shorter ministries. In Exeter Diocese we ordained 16 deacons in 2023, but only 7 started training.

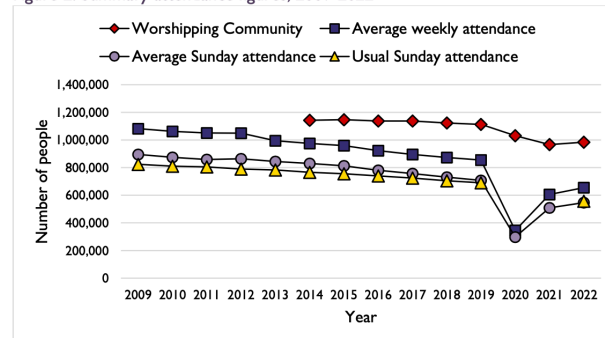
This national shortage will swiftly lead to a dearth of ordained ministry, and the parish system as we have known it will become unsustainable, for we cannot keep adding more parishes to already unmanageable multi-parish benefices. The Diocese of Leicester is re-organising parishes into groupings of up to 23 parishes, and the Diocese of Truro has similar plans. The “Transforming Wigan” project united 33 parishes into a single benefice, with 7 PCCs, but it failed to produce lasting growth. This trend is also magnified by a tendency for Dioceses to employ more central staff advisors at the cost of parochial appointments. In Truro the balance was 39 parish clergy to 38 central staff! Exeter Diocese now employs 52.5 people centrally (full-time equivalent), against 210 Stipendiary clergy (including curates and archdeacons).

6. Decline of Congregations and Lay Officers

The number of those worshipping in the Church of England is falling steadily. Despite a slight recovery after the COVID epidemic, the trend remains:- 37% less adults since 2009 - an annual decline of 2.5%, and 48% less children since 2009. Congregations are shrinking and ageing: the average Cof E attender is 61. The average Sunday congregation is now 33 adults and 4 children.

The statistician John Hayward predicts that the CoE will cease to exist in the 2060s.

Figure 2: Summary attendance figures, 2009-2022



(from 2022 CofE Mission Statistics: note the distinction between Sunday and Weekly attendance, including midweek services, and Usual and Average attendance, which is raised by large seasonal congregations)

Long before the congregations disappear we are likely to lose the volunteer leaders essential to the functioning of parish churches. A survey conducted by the Church Times revealed that 40% of parishes now have only one church warden, and 21% have none at all. The Diocese of Norwich recognises that the parochial system “relies heavily on the goodwill and energy of a dwindling number of increasingly elderly volunteers, members of congregations who will eventually - within **the next 10 years or so** - no longer be able to sustain their efforts,”-

“We can’t go on like this.”

If you care about our Church, these trends are heart-breaking, so many try to ignore them: you will find little discussion of them in the Diocesan Statement of Needs for the next Bishop of Exeter, or the Annual Diocesan Report for 2023, just published. But we cannot respond rightly to a crisis if we ignore it.

This paper is not a counsel of despair - give up now!- but a *Call to Lament*, as an act of faith in the God who alone can reform and renew his Church, and restore the honour of His Name.

The Jews in exile lamented the destruction of Solomon's Temple in 587BC, the end of their independent kingdom of Judah ruled by a King of David's line. The Lord multiplied them in exile and eventually restored them to the land, but He did not restore David's kingdom as they expected.

Jesus lamented the imminent destruction of the Second Temple on his final visit to Jerusalem (Luke 19.41-44) and foresaw its destruction, even as he prepared to die on the cross and open the way into God's Kingdom for all nations.

Many times in church history one generation has lamented the loss of a precious and familiar order, only to discover that God is doing a new and greater thing. As GK Chesterton said almost 100 years ago:

"At least five times, therefore, with the Arian and the Albigensian heresies, with the Humanist sceptic, after Voltaire and after Darwin, the Faith has to all appearance gone to the dogs. In each of these five cases it was the dog that died."...."how complete was the collapse and how strange the reversal we can only see in detail in the case nearest to our own time." (*The Everlasting Man* 1925)

We may look back with sorrow to better days, when churches were full, but there are some things in our church's past for which we should not mourn, and others which we may want to mourn and need to let go: - our sense of privilege and prestige ("we're the established, *proper*, church!"), of thinking that only our favourite liturgy or service is good enough.

As we look at the current, unsustainable condition of the Church of England, we should note that the gospel is still bringing new life in many churches and congregations in England- <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/a-christian-revival-is-under-way-in-britain/>

We should lament because we believe that Jesus is Lord, that his church will one day become his spotless bride, because we long to see that day draw near and play our part in it.

Last year I tried to encourage the congregation to think about "Faith in the Future" and consider what "The Church of Tomorrow" might look like. Now I invite you to pray, personally and in small groups. In the days from Ascension to Pentecost the national church invites us to pray, "Thy Kingdom come". I am hoping to write a further paper, "Can these dry bones live?" reflecting on the vision of Ezekiel 37 in time for then.

In the meantime, I ask you to read some examples of biblical lament, and pray along the lines of this prayer which I have composed.

Graham Hamilton
Wednesday 17 April 2024

Some Biblical Laments:

Psalm 80

Psalm 85

Psalm 130

Micah 8

Jeremiah 7-9

Lamentations 1

Luke 19.41-44

Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
we thank you that in your great mercy you led us
from the darkness of sin into the light and life of Christ your Son
through your Spirit at work in our beloved Church of England.

We see the signs of decline and decay around us,
and we grieve for what is passing away.

We grieve for those who have been wounded or offended by our church,
by the abuses of wealth, power and privilege,
for friends and neighbours, family and children who have turned away from faith.

We lament the compromises with the values of the world around us
for losing our saltiness and hiding the light of your word,
for failing to give, and serve, and speak,
for being lukewarm in our worship, and faithless in prayer.

We weep for the divisions and suspicions which set us against one another

In your mercy, forgive and renew your Church in this Land, and start with me (us)

Amen.