

CHURCHLESS FAITH?

Steve Aisthorpe introduces some new research into Christians who don't go to church.

THE church is declining. Or is it? Certainly attendance at services is declining. While some churches buck this trend, survey data shows the number of people attending church in Scotland has decreased dramatically in recent decades. Part of the picture is what one researcher called 'a haemorrhage akin to a burst artery'; there is a proliferation of people who used to go to church but no longer do. A study in 2007 found that a staggering 39% of people in Scotland were 'former churchgoers now no longer engaged with a church'. The proportion of 'dechurched' people was highest in rural areas.

So who are these people? Have they lost their faith? Research from other places suggests that most 'church leavers' are still committed Christians, suggesting a growing number of people pursuing a 'churchless faith'.

Take Iain for example. Now in his early seventies, since teenage years he has been seeking to follow Christ. He was an elder for three decades. However, four years ago, after a prolonged period of wrestling with doubts, he stopped attending church. The doubts were not about his faith; they were about the relevance of the congregation. The local church seemed to be detached from the wider community and had little to say about people's everyday concerns. "A huge effort went into 'keeping things going', but nobody seemed interested in whether it was furthering the Kingdom,"

Iain told me recently.

In addition to the 'dechurched' there are others who never attended church and yet have a genuine faith. Janet is a young woman with three small children. She hadn't given Christianity much thought until a friend invited her on a Christianity Explored course. She had many questions and welcomed the opportunity to ask them. As the course progressed she 'became captivated by the person of Jesus', and by the end felt like she was 'launching out on a huge adventure with Jesus as guide'. She visited local churches, but found a radical contrast to the lively, interactive, and hospitable setting of the group she had been part of.

The experiences of thousands of 'churchless Christians' remain largely unknown: a significant blind spot for the national church. There can be little doubt that we have much to learn from those who practice their faith outside of institutional churches. Indeed, could it be that changes in churchgoing habits, rather than indicating a simple decline in the Christian community, actually point to fundamental changes in the way Christians engage in fellowship, worship and mission, as more people choose less institutional ways of being church?

Iain meets weekly with Christian friends to drink coffee, discuss issues, share what they have been reading and pray for one another. Janet meets up with two of the

folk who were on the course. It's informal and sporadic. Sometimes they just unload burdens as they chat; sometimes the conversation turns deep and profound; often they pray together.

Church attendance is easy to monitor. Understanding the wider Christian community is a more complex task – but a crucial one if we are to recognise what God is doing and discern our part in it. In research that began in the Highlands last year 30 people who are Christians but not currently engaged with a congregation were interviewed. Among them were men and women of different generations, living in different places, with diverse experiences of church. Based on themes emerging from these interviews, a survey will be developed to be used with a much larger and random sample of people who fit the criteria.

We will soon have a better understanding of church leaving in the Highlands and know more about experiences of churchless faith. We have much to learn from the insights and experiences of those we do not meet in church services, but who are our brothers and sisters in the Lord.

If you would like to know more, please contact me on saisthorpe@cofscotland.org.uk or 07966 286617. ■

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