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31 May 2014: Rev'd Richard Saunders, St Mary Magdalen, Sheet



Do we live in a Christian country? Richard Saunders responds to the recent national debate:

Before Easter, David Cameron affirmed that we are a Christian country and urged Christians to be more evangelical about their faith. But was he right?

Historically, of course, he is absolutely correct. Our main systems of ethics, the way we do law and justice, how we decide what is fair, the protection of the poor, the values of our society, have all been founded on and shaped by Christianity. The foundation of many hospitals and of our education system have their roots in Christianity and the Bible has had an enormous influence on our language and literature.

But in our lifetimes, while the influence of Christianity has grown hugely around the world, it has been waning here at home. The 800,000 people attending a Church of England service on a typical Sunday in 2012 is approximately half the number it was in 1968. In the 2011 census, the proportion of people declaring themselves to be Christian was 59% compared with 72% in 2001. So, although the majority of us see ourselves as Christian, we are not a nation of committed believers. This is particularly true of the younger generation. Though we are by no means as secular a nation as the British Humanist Society would have us believe. For, while the younger generation has much less understanding of Christianity, it is not unspiritual: indeed there is much spiritual searching. It's just that for many younger people the church is not the place to look for spiritual answers. They haven't rejected and left church; they simply never joined.

What of the future? On the one hand Christian values are historically very deeply rooted and are not likely to fade out overnight, even with fewer people attending church. On the other hand, unless there is a real change, numbers of people following Christ are likely to continue to drop. In the end values will change - quite apart from the fact that many are living without knowing the wonderful good news of God's love for us in Jesus Christ.

It is vital that the church wakes up to this. We must not take it for granted that we will always be a Christian country. We need to recognise that for many, Christianity is an unopened book. It is vital that we stay true to our calling to make Christ known, that we speak about our faith with confidence and that we find ways to engage with those who have had little or no contact with church. If we re-main faithful, the God who started his church and made it grow is quite able to re-grow it in our land.

The graph above traces the decline in church attendance and imagines the trend continuing down to 2020, while the average age of worshippers increases: further information is available from the [WhyChurch web site](#).

