

**CLOSING
THE BACK DOOR
OF THE CHURCH**

CLOSING **THE BACK DOOR** **OF THE CHURCH**

**PREVENTING LOSS FROM THE LOCAL CHURCH
AND THE WHOLE CHURCH**

RON KALLMIER AND ANDY PECK

CWR

Copyright © CWR, 2009

Published 2009 by CWR, Waverley Abbey House, Waverley Lane, Farnham, Surrey GU9 8EP, UK. Registered Charity No. 294387. Registered Limited Company No. 1990308.

The rights of Ron Kallmier and Andy Peck to be identified as the authors of this work have been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, sections 77 and 78.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission in writing of CWR.

See back of book for list of National Distributors.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are from the Holy Bible: New International Version (NIV), copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by the International Bible Society.

Concept development, editing, design and production by CWR.

Printed in the UK by Bookmarque

ISBN: 978-1-85345-483-7

CONTENTS

Foreword by Ian Coffey	9
Introduction	11
1. Mind your language	19
2. Why have people left our church?	27
3. How to close the back door: responding to a loss of people	51
4. Why people leave ‘the Church’	87
5. Some visions of the future	101
6. Your next step	127
Further reading	135
Notes	137

We can't fully explain why, but there has been a rapid change in patterns of church attendance and allegiance. Evangelism is vital for the health of churches large and small – but why are so many existing people leaving?

As it grapples with the effects of the growth of individualism and how it impacts churches just like yours this book will take you beyond the superficial, help you to understand what has been happening and what responses are appropriate, and in so doing show you how to avoid the revolving door syndrome in your church.

Declan Flanagan, Chief Executive of Rural Ministries

This is a significant contribution to the debate on what a healthy church looks like. It is well written, thoughtful and provides practical advice on how the 'back door' of churches can be closed. I would strongly commend it to all those who lead local churches.

Bishop Mike Hill, Bishop of Bristol

Just talking about a sinking church will not stop it from drowning. God is always looking to help people who do not give up and are willing to dive in and start rescuing it.

This book will give you some diving instructions !

Ishmael, Travelling family ministry, author, songwriter, missionary and Deacon at Chichester Cathedral

Lionel Fletcher, a well-known Anglican evangelist in the 1930s, said 'All churches grow, we must just stop them leaking'. *Closing the Back Door of the Church* puts this thought to us in a dynamic and relevant way, highlighting not only the problems but offering practical ideas and solutions on how one might face this issue and begin to deal with it.

I've found this stimulating and thought-provoking as it is an issue the Church today must deal with.

Laurence Singlehurst, Cell UK and author of *Sowing, Reaping, Keeping: People-sensitive Evangelism*

FOREWORD

I recall a conversation with a friend concerning the significant numbers of people who (for one reason or another) give up attending church. I pointed out that the picture was not all gloom and doom, citing the steady growth of a large number of churches and the effectiveness of programmes such as the renowned Alpha course. My friend acknowledged the point, but then made a telling comment: ‘Yes, there is some growth in places. But it’s a bit like sitting in the bath with the taps on and the plug out.’

This book is about understanding why the plug is out and – most importantly – how we might attempt to put it back in again.

It won’t surprise you to know that the book looks at how we ‘do’ church and, connected to this, how we can ‘be’ church more effectively. It is not written by theorists but by two people who have experienced church leadership first hand. Based on his research and experience, Ron Kallmier, the Director of Training (2006–2009) at CWR, launched a workshop entitled Closing the Back Door of the Church. The response was greater than anticipated, and Ron realised that here was an issue which perplexed many leaders. His co-author, Andy Peck, is himself an experienced pastor who understands the ‘plug out/open back door’ problem that exists in local churches. Ron and Andy’s thoughtful collaboration draws on some keen insights from a wide variety of sources to help us gain a greater understanding of why people leave church and how the attrition can be addressed with both sensitivity and urgency.

Graham Tomlin puts his finger on a large part of the problem in his insightful book, *The Provocative Church*:

To put it bluntly, church attendance sometimes doesn’t seem to make any great difference to people’s lives. If going to church and calling myself a Christian makes almost no discernable difference to the way I live my life, spend my money or use my time, then it is not surprising if my friends who are not Christians are not that interested in finding out any more about it.¹

Putting it simply, we need to be more credible disciples if we are to create

CLOSING THE BACK DOOR OF THE CHURCH

provocative communities that will be difficult to ignore, attractive to join and harder to leave.

I find *Closing the Back Door of the Church* helpful for a number of reasons. Firstly, it asks the right questions. Why do people leave the Church? Or, to bring it nearer home, why do they leave *our* church? Are there things that we do (or don't do) that could cause people to lapse? Are there early warning signs that we can identify? Can we change our structures in such a way that makes it easier for people to share their restlessness before they consider leaving?

Secondly, the book comes up with some credible answers. Taking account of changes in culture and recognising that when it comes to church it's not a case of 'one size fits all', the authors offer some workable ideas that will help to shape strategies for local churches.

Thirdly, this is a practical book. Each chapter concludes with some sharply focused questions, helping leaders to think constructively about taking a fresh look at how effective communities of faith are built, communities that take into account people's differences and their various levels of understanding and need.

The authors avoid the current trend of claiming to discover some lost element of the gospel, hidden to the Church for centuries but (miraculously) revealed to a chosen few in the last ten years. Instead, they offer some thoughtful approaches to a clear and present danger. It comes down to a single important question: how can we become more effective at growing disciples that stay the course?

I like the mood of this book, as it avoids both the counsel of despair and the language of triumphalism.

Bishop Tom Wright retells the story of the late Lesslie Newbigin, who was asked how he viewed the future; was he optimistic or pessimistic? 'I am,' he said, 'neither an optimist nor a pessimist. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead!'²

A living hope, based on the living Christ remains the source of our strength.

Ian Coffey, Director of Leadership Training, Moorlands College
Summer 2009

INTRODUCTION

Andy Peck

In 2006 Ron Kallmier, Director of Training at CWR, advertised a workshop called Closing the Back Door of the Church, which considered why people were leaving local churches, and the Church in general. Day courses are a regular part of CWR's ministry, alongside the longer and more concentrated counselling courses. All are held at Waverley Abbey House near Farnham, Surrey, the home of CWR since 1987. Ron expected about twenty people, so he was surprised and delighted when more than eighty came.

Since then the workshop has run seven times, with a limit of forty people to facilitate interaction. The course has been adapted as reflections from participants have shaped Ron's thinking, and as he has discovered new ways of presenting the material. The course has drawn church leaders, church members, and some who have stopped attending church altogether. Most have come from the UK, and a few from overseas. For many, losing people from their church was a live issue. Many were hungry for answers, fearful that the local church they know and love would not survive unless something was done.

This book is based on those workshops. The first section looks at why people leave local churches, and what can be done about this. We then ask why people leave 'the Church' in general – ie leave one church but never join another. We end by looking at how some churches in the UK are making a positive response to this reality, and preparing for an exciting future.

Ron invited me to help with this book when the demands of directing CWR's training department reduced the time available to write. It says a lot about his generous spirit that he has left me to take care of his 'baby' with little interference, and given me free rein to add my own material too.

The reason for the workshops – Ron Kallmier

A SEASON OF GLOBAL CHANGE

During the past twenty years, the worldwide Church has been undergoing arguably its most major transformation in 2,000 years. For many decades

CLOSING THE BACK DOOR OF THE CHURCH

the Church had been growing in Africa, Asia and South America while it has been declining in Europe, and this trend has accelerated dramatically over the past twenty years: during this time significant sections of the Church in the West, including many local congregations, have suffered a contraction of membership and attendance. This is particularly true of traditional Protestant denominations. In many of the declining churches the average age is increasing, causing added concern for the medium-to-long-term viability of these congregations.

Over that same twenty-year period I have been reading, reflecting and talking to church leaders in the UK and in Australia endeavouring to gain the broadest possible picture of the Church in the West. From what I have learned, some church leaders are unclear about the philosophical and cultural changes that have taken place in our Western culture, and those who are aware of such changes are troubled by them. For many of us in Christian leadership, the current situation poses the question: 'What can be done about it?'

Undoubtedly, the Church has 'leaked' members at a disconcerting rate in many Western churches over the last three decades. The slow but steady decline of church attendance which began in the 1960s has gathered pace. Simultaneously, the Church's influence in society has been marginalised or repudiated as the lingering influence of old Christendom has dissipated.

One of the defining moments which stimulated my concern for the future of the Church occurred thirty years ago. I was in full-time Christian education and youth ministry as a denominational leader of the Churches of Christ based in Sydney, Australia. One of my most satisfying duties was to lead inter-church Christian youth camps. Even in those days, numerical decline was beginning to affect the Church. I was deeply concerned that young people were finding it difficult to connect with activities in the local churches. Many were Christians, or from Christian families. The analogy that came to mind was of a fast-running stream with the young people on one side and the Church on the other – and no stepping-stones between. I remember asking my colleagues, 'How can we make the Church accessible to these young people?'

For many of us in local church leadership during the last twenty years, the task of charting our church's future is complicated by an avalanche

of new circumstances, and by the accelerating pace of change both inside and outside our churches. For many of us, simply understanding what is going on is difficult. To stay true to our calling as Christian leaders trying to follow the teachings of Jesus, amidst the tangle of changes happening around us, is quite daunting.

One of the major contributors to church decline is the effect of our changing world. Its influence is profound and pervasive, and not all church members are aware of it. But those who do not understand how global changes will affect their local churches will have to face up to them. If we cannot see that our changing world and culture are intruding into the lives of church people, we will have a ‘blind spot’ that prevents us from addressing the ‘back-door’ problem – for the local church, and the worldwide Church.

There are challenges confronting the Western Church here and now. Others are looming in the near future. At the same time, however, there are blossoming opportunities for the Church in this new era. The prevailing changes will shape the everyday world of people who are in the Church, or were in the Church – or who we would like to see in the Church. We fail to recognise the speed of change at our own risk, in the short term and the long term.

As church leaders, we mustn’t have a hazy view of the state of our world: we must be clear about the culture in which our church people, and their neighbours, live and struggle. Christian leaders must be better informed about local and global trends. Then we can discern the opportunities and problems that will confront our local churches in the next five to ten years. We cannot foresee it all, but we must learn and pray and plan. Otherwise, we will still be preparing for what has passed away! In that event, what happens in our churches will be seen as increasingly irrelevant to ordinary, weekday life. Clearly the task is not a simple one, especially when we are trying to follow the guidance of Scripture.

This is a time for churches to empower their people with the same spirit and wisdom as the men of Isaachar, who ‘understood the times and knew what Israel should do’ (1 Chron. 12:32). We must do in-depth research, and pray for guidance. We must use our eyes and ears to understand what people inside and outside the Church are communicating to us, verbally or in other ways. More than ever we need to seek the wisdom and power of

the Holy Spirit who birthed, directs and sustains this unique body called the Christian Church.

About this book – Andy Peck

When Ron asked me to help with this book, I was delighted. The Church, and its growth and decline, have been concerns throughout my working life. In 1991 I travelled to the USA to see what could be learned from visiting some of the ‘mega-churches’ there, and I had the privilege of meeting staff of Chicago’s Willow Creek Community Church, a church that UK church leaders were beginning to learn from. A decade later I returned to visit another ‘mega-church’, Saddleback Community Church in Orange County, California, and I’ve tried ever since to keep abreast of such influences on the UK Church.

In the UK I’ve been able to preach in over fifty churches and work as a pastor in three of them: in Bournemouth, Southampton and Banstead, Surrey. I have enjoyed Christian Brethren worship, which I grew up with on the Isle of Wight, in two Baptist churches, conservative and charismatic in an independent ‘seeker-targeted’ church (aiming to reach those who are outside the Church, but seeking God) and in a New Wine Anglican church. My regular podcast listening includes services from a mega-church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and a former Pentecostal church in Redding, California. All of which means I am either eclectic in my worship, or thoroughly mixed-up! What unites all these churches is the centrality of a Bible-based understanding of life, and a desire to make Christ known to those inside and outside the Church.

Prior to becoming a CWR tutor I was deputy editor of the London-based *Christianity* magazine, and I currently host *The Leadership File*, a weekly programme on London’s Premier Christian Radio. Both jobs have given me a unique insight into the Church in the UK and overseas, opportunities to meet Christian leaders, and an inside track on how the Church is responding to the challenges of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

Perhaps you are reading this because your interest was sparked by the title: maybe because people have left your church and you are wondering why; or because you know why and don’t know what to do about it. Maybe you are aware of the anti-Church trends in the UK and many other

Western nations. Maybe you see the signs, and anticipate problems in your own church?

CHURCH DECLINE

The secularisation of Britain has been well documented. Although some sections of the media seem gleeful about decreasing church attendance, and perhaps exaggerate the extent to which Britain is a ‘godless nation’, there is plenty of hard statistical evidence of this decline. The organisation Christian Research found that one million people left the Church in the UK between 1989 and 1998, with a further half-million from 1998 to 2005.¹ Peter Brierley’s book based on these figures, *Pulling Out of the Nose Dive*, suggests we can be grateful that people are not leaving the Church as quickly as they were.

Monica Furlong writes: ‘In the twenty years between 1980 and 2000 the Church of England suffered a 27 per cent decline in church membership. The Roman Catholic Church suffered a similar decline in the same period in Mass attendance.’² The major denominations face the biggest declines, with just Baptist churches holding their own during this period. Even the ‘New Churches’, which were growing, have levelled off in numbers. The sector seeing growth during this period was the Black-majority churches in London, and the Orthodox Church (partly because of a rise in immigrant numbers).³

Some want to put a more positive spin on these figures. Certainly we must factor in church attendance patterns: in many Anglican churches, attending church once a month would not be uncommon, and the statistics probably miss this. The figures may exaggerate the loss because Anglican churches, which represent the largest denomination, might choose to underestimate their attendance in order to reduce their quota within the diocese. In *The Empty Church Revisited* (2003) Robin Gill, reflecting on the lower attendances in the Church of England, writes: ‘The decline in membership may partly reflect a membership role that is more tightly kept (to avoid excessive local quotas).’ He concludes, however: ‘At every point the Church of England appears to be in chronic decline.’⁴

Do these attendance figures reflect a true picture of the Church in the UK? In a previous generation many would attend church because it was ‘the done thing’, along with paying taxes, giving to charity, and listening to the

CLOSING THE BACK DOOR OF THE CHURCH

Queen’s Speech on Christmas Day. Many people went to church with little or no genuine faith in God or intention to follow Jesus, but happy enough to be ‘OK for heaven’ (as they saw it). Today, people are far less likely to be in church conforming to social convention, or for ‘show’. Maybe today’s low church attendance is merely an obvious demonstration of what has existed for a long time.

RELIGIOUS DECLINE

This decline in church attendance is part of an overall decline in religious affiliation in the UK, as the figures below indicate.

Population in the UK attending church:

1979 – 12%, 1989 – 10%, 1998 – 7.5% (Christian Research)

Percentage who:	1964	1970	1983	1992	2005
‘belong’ to a religion	74	71	55	37	31
do not ‘belong’ to a religion	3	5	26	31	38

Source: *British Social Attitudes* (2006/7)⁵

Professional research in 2006 by Tearfund found that two-thirds (66% – 32.2 million people) of the UK have no connection with any religion or church.⁶ In independent research, the Church Army suggest 40% have no connection with a church.⁷ In August 2003, 18% of the British public said they were a practising member of an organised religion, and 25% that they were members of a world religion. According to these results, one fifth of self-declared members of a religion would also not describe themselves as practising that religion.⁸

Martyn Percy believes that a decline in religion does not mean a declining interest in spirituality:

There seems to be little evidence that religion is becoming less of a feature within contemporary culture. For example the interest in spirituality – religious and sacred sentiment outside the immediate control of formal religion – has been burgeoning for many years in the Western world. It would seem that, in the midst of consumerism

and secularization, people are turning more than ever to texts and techniques that inspire and enchant. This appears to result in the continual (if somewhat diffuse) infusion of inchoate spirituality at every level of society, suggesting that society, no matter how atomized and incoherent, persists in the quest for sacral meaning amidst the everyday reality of mundane modernity.⁹

But even with these necessary caveats, the figures are discouraging. Fewer people are attending church, and many in Britain are not looking to the Church to meet their spiritual needs.

This book aims to help Christians who want to grapple with the issues surrounding church decline, assess their own situation, and decide what to do if their church is not to follow the sad statistics. If you have been on one of CWR's church attendance workshops, the flavour of the book will be familiar, but much of the material will not. We hope it will be used by staff teams, leadership teams, diaconates and PCCs – perhaps as a discussion starter. In many churches hard decisions will need to be taken if they are to halt the decline, meet the needs of the present, and also – most importantly – adapt to the demands of the future.

CWR exists to support the Church, and we do not believe it is our role to endorse any particular view of the future. In any case, this subject does not lend itself to a 'seven steps to solve the problem' style, so we offer several options and leave you to judge which are appropriate or desirable models for your situation – praying that God may guide your steps as you seek His direction.

But first, we need to make sure we are talking about the same thing.



01

MIND YOUR LANGUAGE

What do we mean by ‘church’?

The title *Closing the Back Door of the Church* conveys the image of church leaders suddenly realising that people are slipping out of the back of the building, as they welcome new arrivals at the front. The numbers attending the CWR workshop suggest it’s a title that has worked well. But like any word picture, it can be taken too far. We need to underline at the very start that while the *church building* is often associated with the *church* that meets there, they are not the same. Indeed a focus on church as ‘the building’ and not ‘the people’ can mean we fail to appreciate what ‘church’ really means.

In this book we use the word ‘church’ in its New Testament sense. The Greek word *ekklesia* – literally ‘assembly, congregation, council’ – is the traditional term for the Christian Church. The Latin form *ecclesia* is used in English to denote either a particular local group of Christians, or the whole body of the faithful. In the book of Acts, which describes the activity of the apostles just after Jesus ascended into heaven, the apostles used this common Greek word to denote a gathering of those who were followers of Jesus Christ. Following Jesus had a particular meaning in those days, linking with Jesus’ practice of calling the twelve apostles and others to be with Him, and learn from Him how to live a new kind of life in the kingdom of God. *Ekklesia* denoted people who had embraced Jesus as the One who had ultimate say over their lives and were willing to let Him teach them how to live in this world, and trusting Him for the world to come.

This needed teasing out of course, and the New Testament epistles express what following Jesus would mean for Jews and Gentiles alike as the message of Jesus was preached across the Roman world. The Gospel writers – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the apostle Paul, Peter, Jude, and the writer to the Hebrews – outline the implications of following Christ for the people they led and served in the first century, so that those who gathered in Christ’s name remained communities committed to believing and living an orthodox and authentic gospel. The New Testament writers explain how this new faith followed on from the Old Testament, and also in places diverged from it. They explain what it meant for Jesus’ Lordship to be known in a pagan world, where the Roman emperor Caesar was regarded as ‘Lord’.

CLOSING THE BACK DOOR OF THE CHURCH

In that day there were no church buildings, these gatherings typically assembling in a larger home of one of the believers. In *Houses that Change the World: The Return of the House Churches*¹ Wolfgang Simson argues that these house groups were no more than twelve to fifteen in number, but in truth we do not have records, merely estimates based on the sizes of the larger houses in those days. There would be typically just one church in a town, or perhaps a number of house churches in a city – all united spiritually despite any geographical separation, and recognising the apostles' right to teach and explain the doctrines of the faith.

This trip down a biblical memory lane is simply to underline that when we talk of 'Church' today, according to the Bible we are referring to people who name Jesus as their ruler in life, and have indicated their desire to follow Him publicly. If we accept that the Bible is God's revelation then we will understand 'Church' the way He wants us to understand it, rather than the way its meaning has developed historically. And we will refrain from being dogmatic about matters where Scripture is silent or allows liberty of interpretation.

In the context of 'closing the back door', it is worth underlining the following:

- Some people leave the church (ie the physical premises of the church), but were never part of the Church spiritually, even if they said they were.
- Leaving a local church does not necessarily mean leaving 'the Church'. Someone who has left may still name Jesus as their leader in life, and so still be part of the universal Church. It may be unwise to stop meeting with other Christians, and it may lead to a drift away from a vital faith – but it doesn't mean that people who have left a church cease to be believers, or part of God's family.
- Many of our church gatherings today are probably different from the Early Church gatherings. In those days most of those gathered, if not all, would have been believers. In many settings, identifying with a church would have provoked ridicule or persecution, so that only those who were truly committed would attend.
- Many churches today consciously welcome people of no faith, struggling faith and other faiths to their public services. If and when

some of this fringe ‘leave the church’ they will often have different reasons from those who regard themselves as Christians.

- ‘Closing the back door’ refers to initiatives that churches can follow to prevent the flow of people from a local church, but as we shall see there are some factors we can do nothing about.
- ‘Church’ always means a gathering of people. So while we might use ‘the Church’ as shorthand to refer to social trends, or ‘Church doctrine’ to refer to beliefs, it is dangerous to use statements such as ‘Our church thinks ...’ or ‘Our church is active in ...’ The Church is made up of individuals, so a spectrum of opinion is likely on many matters.
- The concept of ‘the local church’, which presumes many churches separate from one another, is not biblical. In this book we accept the reality of independent local churches; but we do not accept that the denominational or doctrinal divisions between churchgoers, who often have very similar beliefs, is a good thing.

This attempt at a biblical definition of ‘Church’ is essential, because many people in Britain have a skewed understanding of what the Church is about. Britain is still known as a ‘Christian country’. The Queen is the head of the Church of England, and still involved in the appointment of bishops. Bishops in that Church sit in the House of Lords. We have thousands of buildings known as ‘churches’ in cities, towns and villages across the countries that make up the United Kingdom. Many in our nation would claim to be Christians, and in the 2001 census just under 72% described themselves as ‘Christian’.²

We have to distinguish between what might be termed the ‘trappings of Christendom’, and real Church life as understood in the New Testament. When the term ‘the Church’ is used, in the media and even in Christian circles, it rarely reflects the glory of that company of people joined to Christ and awaiting His return. Our concern in this book is not so much that fewer people ‘come to church’, but rather that true believers in Jesus are not able to continue in fellowship with other believers; and that many people rule out the possibility of finding in the Church answers to the questions that trouble them, or solutions to the issues they face in life. The authors of this book believe that churches can and should change; should communicate

an authentic gospel which draws people under God's grace into a living relationship with God; should be part of a community in which His Lordship is known, and growth in Him is encouraged; and that such growth in God's grace should benefit the formal and informal communities in which Christians find themselves.

Good news

Although the statistics of church attendance in the UK may seem gloomy, it is worth acknowledging with gratitude the many signs of Christian life. Over two million people in the UK have attended an Alpha course. Alpha is a fifteen-session introduction to the Christian faith. Based at Holy Trinity Church, Brompton, west London, the course has been exported worldwide, with estimates of thirteen million having attended an Alpha course. Some of those people will have found their way through the front door of a church, and many have come into a living relationship with God. 'Christianity Explored' and the 'Y course' have also been used successfully to help people grasp the basics of the Christian faith.

Many sectors of the Church have woken up to the need to reach out to their communities, helping those outside Church realise that Christianity really is good news. To pick out one of many such attempts, the Eden Project in Greater Manchester is an initiative of the Worldwide Message Tribe (now The Message Trust) which has led to the planting of ten small Christian communities in areas of deprivation. These have brought significant reductions in crime and vandalism, such that local house prices have improved after decades of decline. According to the *Manchester Evening News*,³ 'Drawing donations from thousands of people and businesses – many of them non-Christian – The Message has a £2.5m annual budget, employing 75 full-time staff and marshalling 300 volunteers. Though they do not go for the hard-sell, The Message is also responsible for part of the recent rise in church attendance in Greater Manchester.'

We need to note too that the decline in church attendance is a largely Western phenomenon. According to the Center for the Study on Global Christianity at the Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Massachusetts, USA, every major religion except Islam is declining in Western Europe.⁴ The drop is most evident in France,

Sweden and the Netherlands, where church attendance is less than 10% in some areas.

Worldwide, the trend is different. Christianity is ranked as the largest religion in the world today, with approximately two billion adherents. In parts of the world, the Church is growing rapidly: Brazil, Argentina, South Korea, parts of Africa, China – and India, where recent growth has been phenomenal.

As we shall see in the course of this book, non-church attendance may not say a great deal about someone's spiritual life. According to church statistician George Barna, in his book *Revolution*,⁵ some twenty million people, dubbed 'Revolutionaries', live 'a first-century lifestyle based on faith, goodness, love, generosity, kindness, and simplicity', and 'zealously pursue an intimate relationship with God' – but never attend church.

One website, www.notinchurch.com, puts it like this:

We would describe ourselves as Christian. If pressed for a fuller description we could use terms such as evangelical, charismatic, bible believing, possibly fundamentalist in a traditional way. Over the years we have been involved in youth ministry and youth clubs, involved in concert promotion, involved in organising large scale missions such as Billy Graham Satellite Missions, preaching in local churches and involved in local area missions.

But they are not found in church on a Sunday!

We may question the wisdom of believers avoiding church, but it is a phenomenon we cannot ignore when considering the topic of church membership.

Your church

Whatever we think the Bible says about Church, and however well informed we may be about statistics of churchgoing, my guess is that we all think of 'church' as the place where we worship, or perhaps as a composite of the churches we have attended. As we shall see, many people are turned off Christianity, or church attendance, because of their personal response to a particular local church. If we think they are foolish to judge the whole

Church on one expression of it, my suspicion is that this is pretty common for us all. In this book you will have to forgive us for needing to talk in generalities about ‘the Church’ when your church may be nothing like that. We know that Church can be much better and much worse than what we describe, but as authors we need to show the gap between the Church as she is now and what she will be when Christ returns. You will make your judgment on whether we have been unfair, or skewed in our description; but we hope you understand the need to spend some time examining the patient’s wounds if we are to have any hope of providing an appropriate diagnosis – and suggesting a cure.

Questions for discussion

1. When you hear the word ‘church’, what is the first image that comes into your mind?
2. Are you aware of a decline in Christianity in Britain (or the country you know best)?
3. Do you know of churches where numbers have declined? Do you know of people who have left the Church and not returned?
4. Concerning church attendance, how big a problem is the Church in the UK facing?
5. How big a problem is declining attendance in your church?