From Delusion to Reality
An Evaluation of From Anecdote to Evidence

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Background

The Church of England’s annual statistics for 2011 were published alongside a press release welcoming ‘the stabilising of the numbers of those who attend church services on a weekly basis’.¹ The press release for the 2012 statistics claimed that ‘weekly attendance over the past decade has not changed significantly’.² However, the 2013 figures were accompanied by the frank admission that weekly attendance was ‘down about 1% on the previous year’.³

The mood has changed. There is now an open recognition of the reality of decline. During the February 2015 sessions of the General Synod, John Spence acknowledged that over the last 30 years ‘while the population of the country was increasing year by year, the average decline in church membership and attendance was over 1% per annum, which compounded takes you down by over 50%’.⁴

He was introducing a day of Synod work on the wide-ranging Task Group proposals which together form a programme of ‘Reform and Renewal’ designed to halt and start reversing a downwards trend which has been in place for over 80 years.⁵ The report from the Task Group responsible for the resourcing of this programme states:

‘Recommendations have emerged from the other Task Groups for extra investment in national and diocesan activity which is designed to enhance the overall number and training of church leaders, and make other strategic interventions which will advance the mission of the whole Church. It is not our job to decide on priorities but we believe that extra investment must be made if the Church is deliver its ambitions for mission and growth.

⁴ Proceedings of the February 2015 group of sessions of General Synod, p. 77.
⁵ A Post-Synod Briefing (17 February 2015) by William Fittall gives a useful overview of the aims, what has been decided, and what happens next.
We hope that additional distributions from the Church Commissioners can be found to fund this new investment, alongside that provided by parishes and dioceses.\footnote{General Synod Report of the Task Force on Resourcing the Future of the Church of England\textsuperscript{(GS1978)}, p. 7.}

The additional funds required have been estimated to be at least £100m over 10 years.\footnote{Proceedings of the February 2015 group of sessions of General Synod, p.151, \& General Synod Report of the Task Group on Resourcing Ministerial Education in the Church of England\textsuperscript{(GS1979)}, p. 3.} In response to the question ‘Does the Church know enough about the causes of church growth to ensure that any significant investment in funding is well-spent?’ the report replies:

‘The evidence base relating to church growth has increased significantly over recent years as a result of the church growth research programme (\url{http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/}). Nobody pretends that there is a simple relationship between cause and effect but there is a growing amount of information about what is likely to support growth – or likely to maintain decline. Funding decisions can and should be informed by this information so that the Church’s money is put to best effect.’\footnote{GS1978, op. cit., p. 14.}

The findings of this research are reported in \textit{From Anecdote to Evidence}\footnote{‘From Anecdote to Evidence: Findings from the Church Growth Research Programme 2011-2013’ published by The Archbishops’ Council, January 2014.} (hereafter referred to as \textit{AtoE}), which this paper is concerned to evaluate. \textit{AtoE} was published in January 2014, but the subsequent Task Group plans, especially the proposal to borrow from the future (funding the work using some of the historic assets of the Church Commissioners), make an assessment of the reliability of this evidence especially important and urgent. An awful lot is hanging on this single piece of research.

\textbf{Introduction}

The Bishop of London, Richard Chartres, introduces the Church Growth Research Programme in a video on the website:

‘The demise of the Church of England has been grossly exaggerated. It’s a common media story but in fact as you go around the country there are many communities and parishes that are growing. And we want to identify the levers and the drivers of growth. And we want to do that, not just out of a spirit of pure research but in order to help those involved in leadership in parishes and communities to see how resources can be used most effectively.’\footnote{http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/about_the_programme}

The principle is simple and clear. Some churches are growing, therefore ask: ‘What do we know about why some churches grow and some decline? What factors are likely to be
present in growing churches and declining churches?’ (AtoE p. 1). If such factors can be identified, then by applying them more widely, the Church as a whole may be enabled to grow.

The research was commissioned by the Spending Plans Task Group which reports to the Archbishops’ Council and the Board of the Church Commissioners. The programme ran for 18 months between 2011 and 2013. It was organised in three strands:

Strand 1 – Data Analysis: Statistical analysis of data routinely collected by The Church of England from parishes and dioceses through annual returns.

Strand 2 – Church Profiling: Extensive surveying of churches.

Strand 3 – Structures: Study of Cathedrals, Fresh Expressions of Church, Church Planting, Amalgamations and Team Ministries.

This paper is concerned with Strands 1 & 2, and only Amalgamations from Strand 3.

The work of Strands 1 & 2 was undertaken by a team from the Institute for Economic and Social Studies at the University of Essex, led by Professor David Voas. A report by David Voas and Laura Watt is available on the Church Growth Research website dated February 2014, however a fuller and later report (September 2014) has been made available to me by Kevin Norris (Church House, London). Only the later report will be referenced in this paper, hereafter referred to as V&W.

It should be noted that most people familiar with this research will only have read AtoE, not the underlying reports. This paper will work through the findings as presented in AtoE, drawing on V&W throughout in order to assess the accuracy of the presentation.

Self-Reported Growth & Objective Growth

The heart of the work reported in V&W is statistical analysis of the level of growth of the church in 1,703 parishes in relation to over 200 factors covering themes which include demography, the church profile, laity, clergy and resources.

It is important to appreciate that two different measures of growth have been employed:

‘Objective’ growth: Calculated using data from annual returns made by the parishes. It is ‘an average of the standardised rates of change between 2001-3 and 2009-11 in four indicators:

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usual adult Sunday attendance; all age average weekly attendance; child average Sunday attendance; Easter attendance.’ (V&W p. 5f)

Self-reported growth: Based on the response to the survey question ‘During the past five years, has the number of people who attend for worship at least monthly...Declined a little / Declined substantially / Grown a little / Grown substantially /Stayed about the same.’ No quantitative definition of ‘a little’ or ‘substantially’ was supplied with the question. (V&W p. 6)

‘Somewhat alarmingly, the correspondence between the objective and subjective measures is rather low.’ The levels of self-reported growth are ‘probably exaggerated... there appears to be a tendency to report some growth rather than none, and to avoid reporting substantial decline.’ But it is not simply an ‘across-the-board over-estimation’. ‘The correlation between the two measures is only 0.29, which means that some churches with poor statistical returns claim to be doing well and vice versa.’ Inasmuch as a comparison can be made, 51% of parishes self-report growth which is higher than given in the annual returns; 23% self-report lower growth than given in the annual returns. (V&W p. 6f.)

‘What is worrying is the possibility of bias. If churches or clergy with particular characteristics are more likely than others to over-estimate growth, the analysis may incorrectly attribute causal power to those factors.’ (V&W p. 7)

Consistent inflation across all parishes of self-reported growth ‘does not pose a problem’. ‘Although in principle the “objective” measure should be more reliable than self-reported growth, we know that the data are imperfect.’ Attention is drawn to the problem which sometimes arises of ‘...a mismatch between the parish-level figures and the individual parish churches being described on the survey forms. If the parish includes additional churches that have experienced different rates of change, the overall figures may not characterise the church the respondent had in mind.’ (V&W p. 6)

The report does not speculate on whether such bias may exist, however since there are clearly psychological and sociological reasons why self-reported growth can be exaggerated, it would appear likely that the degree and direction of error in self-reporting will depend on the characteristics of the incumbent and the environment.

As it happens, some evidence of this is provided elsewhere in the report, though a connection is not made with the problem of bias in self-reporting:

‘Over the past few years the diocese of Leicester has asked parishes to enumerate joiners and leavers with the aim of estimating the size and growth of the “worshipping community”. The figures imply that there was been growth of 15% over the four years from 2009 to 2012, while attendance showed little change. The problem is that it is very difficult to count members of the worshipping community.'
Decades of experience with many denominations has taught religious statisticians that it is easier to count people on the way in than on the way out.’ (V&W p. 14)

Estimation of the size of the worshipping community has strong similarities to answering the question on self-reported growth. Measurement of the ‘worshipping community’ is now part of the annual return form sent to all parishes in the Church of England. The guidance defines this community to include anyone ‘who attends your church… regularly, for example at least once a month’, similar to the definition for self-reported growth.\(^\text{14}\)

This suggests that churches with a higher turnover of attendees will be more inclined to over-estimate self-reported growth. So parishes with more mobile populations will over-estimate more than parishes with more stable populations. Mobility correlates with age, so this may introduce a bias towards higher self-reported growth by urban parishes compared with rural parishes.\(^\text{15}\) This may even go some way to explaining why V&W found a positive association of ‘Urban parish’ with self-reported growth but no correlation with objective growth. (V&W p. 121)

In the end, V&W do not make any judgement on which measure of growth is more reliable:

‘In any event we carried out the analyses using both measures of growth and report both sets of findings where the differences are worth noting. In general the results were similar whichever measure of growth was used as the variable to be explained, though typically self-reported growth had the stronger associations with other factors. The objective indicator is helpful as a cross-check.’ (V&W p. 8)

The associations with objective growth cannot be dismissed because of their relative weakness. For all their imperfections, the objective data (unlike the self-reported data) are rooted in the actual counting of heads, difficult as that sometimes is. They form the basis for the story of decline which has led to this research and they are the measure by which the results of any growth initiatives will be judged. Also, the longer time period can be expected to reduce the influence of noise when calculating the growth. Whatever factors are shown to be associated with self-reported growth, without corroboration using objective growth no firm conclusions or actions may be reliably determined.

In spite of all these questions and uncertainties, AtoE makes only passing reference to the two measures of growth, nowhere explains the difference, and often reports ‘findings’ based on self-reported growth, neglecting the different evidence found using objective growth (as shall be shown below).

\(^{14}\) Worshipping Community information sheet, Church of England website.

\(^{15}\) According to the 2011 census, the median age was 45 in rural areas compared with 37 in urban areas. 2011 Census Analysis - Comparing Rural and Urban Areas of England and Wales, Office for National Statistics, 22 November 2013.
Causality & Correlation

'It is important to note that association does not establish causality. In other words, association by itself does not prove or disprove anything, and can only at best show that two things are mathematically related, whether or not they are causally related. Therefore a study can only establish that there is association, not proof of why there is association. Given the discovery of an association the next step may be to do further research to test whether, why and how these factors inter-relate.' (AtoE p. 8)

This is an impressively clear statement of a vital warning and it would better have appeared in bold in the main text rather than in small print as a footnote.

It is not just the case that a factor which is associated with growth may not cause growth, it is possible that the causality may work in reverse: an increase in growth may cause the change in the factor. It is also possible that a deliberate change in the factor in the direction associated with growth may actually cause a decrease in growth.

At the risk of insulting the intelligence of the reader, here is an example. A study across the world’s population of life expectancy and car miles travelled per year would show that both increased together. The reason of course is that car miles are an indicator of wealth, which is a cause of health. A deliberate increase in car miles would only reduce life expectancy.

The temptation to ignore this warning can be subtle and powerful. When discussing the findings on leadership, AtoE bolsters its argument for the prioritising of certain qualities by stating that ‘the researchers have recognised and given due consideration to the potential problems of attributing causality when reporting associations in these and other findings.’ (AtoE p. 10)

This says nothing specific while giving the impression to the unwary reader that the problem can be dismissed. Whatever the authors of AtoE meant by ‘due consideration’, it is clear that V&W made no claim to have demonstrated causality.

At the end of AtoE, in a paragraph describing the work of the team at Essex University, it is stated that the researchers ‘looked at the effect of particular factors whilst attempting to “control” statistically for a range of other factors and interventions and so attempting to overcome the challenge of distinguishing between correlation and causation’. (AtoE p. 32)

This refers to multivariate analysis, described principally in the last section of V&W (pp. 99-105). It is a nearly true statement as long as it is understood carefully. It is not true that for a given factor it is possible to distinguish between correlation and causation by such analysis. V&W clearly state this: ‘Note too that these statistics identify relationships but not necessarily causality.’ (V&W p. 100)

It does allow that, for a given factor, the correlation with growth can be more accurately determined, thereby allowing the factors most closely associated with growth to be
identified. The bivariate correlations (one factor at a time compared with growth) can be misleading because of the way other factors are changing among the data points. Multivariate analysis can therefore narrow down the potential causal factors, but it is not capable of ‘distinguishing between correlation and causation’.

**Factors Linked to Growth**

The first section of *AtoE* identifies ten factors linked to growth:

*Leadership*

The findings confirm that effective leadership leading to growth is a combination of having specific qualities and skills with an intention to grow. (*AtoE*, p. 10)

Note the slide in the language here. This is no longer leadership ‘associated with’ or ‘linked to’ growth, but ‘leading’ to growth, clearly implying causality, which of course is not a finding but an assumption.

‘The survey results show a strong correlation between those clergy who prioritise numerical growth and those clergy whose churches grew in numbers.

When asked a question about which type of growth was their top priority, only 13% selected numerical growth (the other options being spiritual growth/discipleship and social transformation); however this choice is significantly associated with actual growth recorded in the findings.’ (*AtoE* p. 10) (their bold)

*V&W* does not refer to this as a ‘strong’ correlation (it is reported on p. 66, along with the 13% figure). The bivariate correlation coefficients are 0.065 (self-reported growth) and 0.052 (objective growth) (p. 125). Elsewhere in *V&W*, higher levels of association are described as ‘rather weak’ (p. 43). *AtoE* reports the opposite of what is implied by *V&W*.

The description of the prioritising of numerical growth as ‘significantly associated with actual growth’ is taken from *V&W* (p. 66). Technically it is correct, but few will read it technically. It seems clear that, in the context, the point being made by *V&W* is that while this choice represents only a small proportion of the sample, the resulting correlation is still statistically significant. That is, the probability that data with this coefficient could have occurred randomly if the coefficient were actually zero is below a certain threshold. In other words ‘significance’ is a measure of the reliability of the correlation, not the strength. It is possible for a correlation to be statistically significant but weak, as here.

These two paragraphs therefore misrepresent the results in *V&W* and mislead the average reader.
The survey asked clergy to assess their own strengths in eight areas (empathising, speaking, innovating, connecting, managing, envisioning, persisting and motivating), placing themselves on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from ‘no special talent’ to ‘better than most people’. *AtoE* (p. 11) comments that motivating, envisioning and innovating ‘stood out in the survey as being significant in relation to growth’. The bivariate correlation coefficients are all about 0.2 for self-reported growth, though half this for objective growth (*V&W* p. 126).

In assessing one’s abilities in these three areas one would naturally look at the evidence in the current parish situation. It is impossible to separate out the impact of motivational skills and the degree to which the environment is favourable. It therefore seems quite probable that there is an element of reverse causality in these factors, the growth creating the sense of having above average skill.

**Having a Clear Mission and Purpose**

‘Churches that say they have a clear mission and purpose are far more likely to report growth. Of those who report a clear sense of mission and purpose, 64% have grown compared to 25% that had declined. For those that stated that they did not have a sense of clear mission and purpose, 26% had grown and 52% had declined. For those who were unsure 41% had grown and 35% had declined.’ (*AtoE*, p. 11)

We are not told in *AtoE*, but this strong correlation refers to self-reported growth. The correlation with objective growth is about a third of the strength (*V&W*, p. 123). 70% of respondents reported that they do have a clear mission and purpose. Incidentally, this highlights the inflation in the self-reported growth figures since they are appearing to tell a story of a church which is growing overall.

**Being Ready to Self-Reflect and Learn Continually**

‘Alongside having a clear mission and purpose, the researchers found that, “Vitality comes with reflection and choice; the particular style is less important than the fact that it has been considered and embraced rather than adopted by default.”’

(*AtoE* p. 11)

*AtoE* is quoting from p. 43 of *V&W*. The assertion about vitality is here presented as a finding: ‘the researchers found that…’

However in *V&W* the quotation is preceded by: ‘The hypothesis would be that…’ The context is a discussion of the data on worship style, and the sentence about reflection is a conjecture in relation to this. It is neither a research finding nor a general principle.

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16 Personal communication from David Voas.
Being Willing to Change and Adapt

‘For there to be growth, the existing congregation must be willing to change. The researchers commented: “At a minimum, the arrival of new people disrupts what might be a cosy club. In all probability there will need to be larger changes in the timing and type of worship, in how and when the building is used and crucially in shifting lay leadership towards younger and more recent members. Such changes are uncomfortable…”’ (AtoE p. 12)

AtoE is quoting from p. 52 of V&W. The first sentence, ‘For there to be growth…’ also precedes the quoted passage in V&W. Again, it is stretching language to represent this as a research finding, or a ‘key fact from the research’, as described on the new website ‘From Evidence to Action’.17 It is a response to some anecdotal evidence of resistance to change among congregations, and no supporting analysis in relation to growth was carried out.

Assigning Roles to Lay People as well as Ordained Clergy

In this section the main point is to emphasise the benefit of rotating the roles of volunteers regularly.

‘The researchers asked: Do the same people tend to serve in volunteer leadership roles year after year or does your church rotate volunteer service among a larger number of people? Of those who answered that the same people tend to serve, 8% reported growth. Of those who said there was some rotation (tending to be among a limited number of people), 19% reported growth. Of those who said there was a lot of rotation among people in volunteer leadership roles, 47% reported growth.’ (AtoE p. 12)

Unreported is the caveat given in V&W (p. 60): ‘Although it is hard to avoid the suspicion that when lay roles seem fixed the opportunities for growth are much reduced, the direction of causality is not clear. It is no surprise that growing churches find it easier to fill lay leadership roles…’

It seems highly plausible that a thriving church enables rotation of volunteers and quite dubious that an emphasis on rotating the few volunteers present in a struggling parish will produce growth.

17 http://www.fromevidencetoaction.org.uk/factors/willing-to-change-adapt
**Actively Engaging Children & Teenagers**

The full statement under this heading in AtoE (p. 12) is as follows:

‘Growth is found where there is a high ratio of children to adults. Churches which offer programmes for children and teenagers are more likely to grow. Three quarters of churches that offer retreats, conferences or camps for youth report growth, against half among those who do not.’

The correlation between growth and child/adult ratio is certainly present, though as usual it is rather lower (by 50%) using objective growth (V&W p. 126). V&W are ambivalent about how to interpret this correlation:

‘Although it is never easy to identify the causal mechanisms – families produce growth, but they are also attracted to churches that are growing – it seems plausible that children help to keep churches healthy.’ (V&W pp. 22f)

Because of this uncertainty, the child/adult ratio was not included among the ‘variables that seem possible candidates for overall significance’ in the multilinear analysis:

‘We have not included some variables that seem too closely related to growth, for example the child:adult ratio or the statement that the age profile is now younger than previously. These variables are arguably aspects of what needs to be explained rather than being helpful components of an explanation.’ (V&W p. 99)

In other words, while the presence of children and young people may understandably have some positive influence on growth, the engagement of children and teenagers is itself part of the growth more than a driver of growth.

**Actively Engaging with those who might Not Go to Church / Are Outside the Existing Community**

This section reports on the responses to the following survey question:

‘During the past 12 months, has your church run any of the following services for your own members or for people in the community? (Tick all that apply)
- Child day care, pre-school, before or after-school programmes
- Elderly or care in the community programmes
- Environmental projects
- Social services: debt counselling, aid work, shelters, etc.’ (V&W p. 47)

AtoE (p. 12) reports that environmental projects and social services ‘were shown to have a positive impact on growth’. Apart from the slide to an expression of causality rather than association, this is correct, though we further learn from V&W that the correlation with objective growth is less than half that with self-reported growth (V&W p. 122), and that
‘When all of these activities are considered at once, only environmental projects have statistically significant effects’. (V&W p. 47)

AtoE (p. 13) also comments here on the use of social media:

‘A third of churches surveyed said that they used Facebook or other social media on a regular basis. Of those that do, two thirds report growth versus half among those who don’t, however this is almost certainly because they are a sign of young and dynamic leadership rather than because of their direct effects.’

The correlation of Facebook usage with objective growth (0.076) is lower than with self-reported growth (0.180) (V&W p. 123). The moderation of the direct effect makes sense, and is a quote from V&W (p. 49), though it would have been more rigorous to say ‘a sign of growth’ rather than ‘a sign of young and dynamic leadership’. Clergy youthfulness correlates positively with self-reported growth but not at all with objective growth. It is not inconceivable that youthfulness correlates positively with the degree of inflation of self-reported growth, and this can only be exacerbated by a management culture where increasingly a demonstration of numerical growth is the surest way to impress.

**Good Welcoming and Follow Up for Visitors**

This section reports briefly on some anecdotal evidence of the importance of welcome. The one statistical piece of evidence is that ‘Making contact with potential new members after they attend services or activities is associated with growth’ (AtoE p. 13). This is true looking at the single factor and also according to a multivariate analysis of evangelistic initiatives (V&W p. 50) conducted just using self-reported growth. The bivariate correlation using objective growth is 37% of that using self-reported growth.18

**Committed to Nurturing New and Existing Christians**

‘Two thirds of churches which said they offered encouragement and support through specific discipleship courses or courses “preparing members to be a Christian witness in their daily lives” showed growth. In those which reported none or “some emphasis through preaching”, less than half were growing.’ (AtoE p. 13)

The bivariate correlation for Christian nurture courses (e.g. Alpha, Emmaus, Credo) was 0.196 for self-reported growth and 0.059 for objective growth. This correlation remained

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18 The bivariate correlations are 0.142** (self-reported) and 0.053* (objective). Note that these correlations are incorrectly recorded in V&W. The correct figures were supplied in a personal communication from David Voas.
strong in multivariate analysis across the range of evangelistic initiatives using self-reported growth, but the equivalent result is not given for objective growth. (V&W pp. 50, 122)

V&W advise caution in reading all this correlation as causative: ‘As always, it remains an open question whether special events and courses help churches to grow or growing churches are the most motivated to organise them (or both, in all probability)’. (p. 48)

Vision

The brief comments here are at the level of anecdote, drawn from the reasons for growth given by respondents. On the ‘From Evidence to Action’ website, this factor appears to have been merged with ‘Clear Mission & Purpose’. 19

Factors Associated With Decline

Declining Numbers of Children & Young People

‘The church is declining because generations of church-goers are not being replaced and because the church is not keeping young people in their teens and into young adulthood.’ (AtoE p. 25)

Here AtoE summarises the background on ‘Religious change in modern Britain’ presented at the beginning of V&W (pp. 10-18) which shows that the principal reason for the decline in church attendance is change ‘between, not within, generations’. They argue that, ‘What secularisation does is to change the environment in which children are raised and the likelihood of effective religious upbringing. Each generation comes to be less religious than the one before.’ (V&W p. 10)

The remainder of this section is a mirror image of one of the factors linked to growth already discussed: ‘Actively Engaging Children & Teenagers’.

The Effect of Amalgamations

‘The findings show that single church units under one leader are more likely to grow than when churches are grouped together.’ (AtoE p. 27)

In fact, this is only true for self-reported growth in the work of Strands 1 & 2. No significant correlation was found with objective growth (V&W p. 123). Also, V&W comment:

19 http://www.fromevidencetoaction.org.uk/factors/clear-mission-purpose
‘… it is commonly suggested that team ministry, parish amalgamations and other kinds of multi-church units (MCUs) are detrimental to church growth. There may be an association between MCUs and decline, but we are only justified in pointing to MCUs as the cause of that decline if parishes were randomly allocated. In fact, though, parishes that were “fragile” were probably more likely to end up as part of a MCU than those that were more robust.’ (p. 100)

AtoE also reports on the fuller work on amalgamations undertaken in Strand 3 by a team led by David Goodhew. They conclude:

‘The national picture indicates very clearly that church decline correlates with amalgamation of churches. The data shows that churches where there is a single minister for a single church are markedly more likely to grow than churches which are amalgamated with others. And the more churches amalgamated together, the more likely that those churches are to decline.’"20

Further work on amalgamations was subsequently commissioned under the Church Growth Research Programme and conducted by Fiona Tweedie. This considered geographically much wider data, and over a 10 year time period as well as the 5 year time period considered by Goodhew. The result appears to be in sharp contrast to Goodhew: a mixed picture and a conclusion that ‘there is no evidence to suggest that in general the more churches that are amalgamated, the greater the decline’.21

David Goodhew, along with Bob Jackson, wrote to the Church Times following the publication of Tweedie’s research, urging that her work be treated with caution, citing problems with the data, ‘technical statistical issues’, and a failure to ‘distinguish between different sizes of church’.22

Tweedie is aware of the question of church size, noting that ‘Goodhew et al have stated a priori that it is important and use this to drive their analysis. It should be noted that a 2-way ANOVA [analysis of variance] with a size factor would have indicated whether it was significant. No reason is given for the particular division of sizes, nor the results of such an ANOVA reported.’23

The Rural Affairs Group of the General Synod could not be conclusive on the issue in their recent report Released for Mission.24

It is hard to judge without further information, but a good part of the problem appears to be a lack of precision concerning the question being asked. The assertion presented as a

20 ‘Report on Strand 3c Amalgamations, Team Ministries and the Growth of the Church’ by David Goodhew with Ben Kautzer and Joe Moffatt, October 2013, p. 89.
21 ‘Stronger as One: Amalgamations and Church Attendance’ by Fiona Tweedie, September 2014, p. 36.
22 Church Times, 24 October 2014.
23 Tweedie, op. cit., p. 43.
24 Released for Mission: Growing the Rural Church’, GS1092, Archbishops’ Council, January 2015, p. 11.
finding in AtoE, quoted at the beginning of this section, may be read as an answer to the question: 'Is an increase in the number of churches in the group to which a church belongs, on its own, all other factors for that church being kept constant (including clergy resource), associated with a reduction in the rate of growth?' Tweedie's work, as far as it goes, answers, 'No, not in general'. Goodhew et al appear to ask a different question (about whether the fraction of an incumbent's time devoted to a given church is associated with growth) and get a different answer.

In response to a question from Patrick Richmond at the February 2015 General Synod, Philip Fletcher reported that 'A note will be published within the next few months drawing together all of the evidence that is available to date.' It is wise not to expect it to be finally conclusive, but safe to assume that there will be no reinstatement of the general and categorical finding reported in AtoE that 'single church units under one leader are more likely to grow than when churches are grouped together'.

Quantifying Change

If there is to be substantial financial investment on the basis of the evidence from the Church Growth Research Programme it is insufficient to know which levers may influence growth. It is necessary to have some idea of how much growth to expect when the levers are moved.

The multilinear regression gives the best hope of assessing this. These models were constructed for both self-reported growth and objective growth, in each case including ‘all of the variables that seem possible candidates for overall significance’ (V&W p. 99). So there is a different set of variables for each measure of growth.

It was found that:

‘The models account for only a modest amount of the variance in the dependent variables: about a quarter for self-reported growth and a tenth for objectively measured growth. Random measurement error, or noise, will be part of the reason. It is also probable that numerical growth in any given case is the product of a host of idiosyncratic factors that cannot easily be detected. We cannot rule out the possibility that some major explanatory factor has escaped consideration, but the sheer diversity of parish experience is more likely to be responsible.' (V&W p. 100)

To understand this it helps to go back to the original questions quoted earlier:

‘What do we know about why some churches grow and some decline? What factors are likely to be present in growing churches and declining churches?’ (AtoE p. 1)

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The aim was to understand the reasons for the variation in growth between growing churches and declining churches. V&W are saying that their models account for only a small proportion of this gap.

As an example, consider the factor ‘Church has a clear mission and purpose’. The standardised regression coefficient is 0.139, the second highest (behind parish deprivation) for the regression with self-reported growth (V&W p. 101). The standard deviation of the self-reported growth is 1.147. The increase in growth caused by developing a clear mission and purpose is therefore $0.139 \times 1.147 = 0.16$. This means that the effect on the church over a period of 5 years (assuming causality) is to grow by 16% of ‘a little growth’, where ‘a little growth’ is an average of whatever people had in mind when self-reporting. Since 70% of respondents claim already to have a clear mission and purpose, the net effect across the whole church becomes 5% of ‘a little growth’. (It may be thought to be easier to obtain hard numbers using objective growth, but the complication is that the growth unit in this case is an average of four different measures.)

It is true that the different factors will accumulate, but the total number of factors considered important overall and which were statistically significant was 19 for self-reported growth and 7 for objective growth.

Then account must be made for the fact that, as explained earlier, there is good reason to think that the relationships are not wholly causal and that some are reverse causal.

Then there are those factors which simply cannot be changed at all, e.g. the size of the ethnic minority or whether the church school is over-subscribed.

Using objective growth, you are left with the weak levers of: improved clergy envisioning skills (but this is fixed at birth according to V&W, p. 3); multiple priests/deacons (a pipe dream for most parishes); ending conflict on finances or budget (not a lever you want to be in a position to have to use); and being less ready to conduct the funerals of non-churchgoers (pastorally and theologically not worth the growth, though who believes this is a causality?) The options are wider with self-reported growth, but the causality is more dubious, and further correction is necessary because the growth is generally inflated.

Then finally another downwards adjustment must be made to the net effect across the Church because a significant proportion of the growth of the growing churches surveyed will be transfer from other churches. As V&W comment,

‘…some churches grow at the expense of others. Sheep are not stolen; they simply chose their fields, and it is helpful to understand why they roam. Nevertheless it would be pointless (from the perspective of the Church as a whole) to put

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26 Personal communication from David Voas.
enormous efforts into activities that simply shift people from one parish to another, unless the aim is to invest in some churches and to close others.’ (p. 90)

The remaining increase in growth to be expected from the use of these factors will not be zero, but it will be nowhere near sufficient to halt the relentless generational decline.

Interestingly, staffing levels do not appear among the ‘candidates for overall significance’, using either measure of growth. ‘Multiple priests/deacons serving just this church’ is positively associated with growth, but the bivariate correlation is the same as that used above for ‘Church has a clear mission and purpose’, using self-reported growth, and half the size using objective growth (V&W p.123). In relation to clergy resource, V&W note:

‘…it is difficult to be sure about the direction of causality. Investment can produce growth, but growth is needed to justify investment. It does seem highly plausible, though, that more clerical resource is helpful in producing growth and vice versa.’ (p. 93)

A multilinear analysis across the clergy resource categories gave a standardised regression coefficient of just 0.091 for ‘Multiple priests/deacons serving just this church’ (V&W p. 94) which, by comparison with the above calculation for ‘Church has a clear mission and purpose’, can be seen to give no promise of a significant increase in growth, and certainly not at a level which by itself justifies the investment. Similar results were obtained from the same analysis across employed lay worker categories (V&W p. 95).
SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

The Church Growth Research initiative commissioned an impressive and necessary programme of work at a time when the Church had begun to face more realistically the challenge of declining attendance. The research has been highly praised:

‘I think one of the best things that has happened in recent years is the publication of From Anecdote to Evidence, which is enabling us to look to the future with rather more confidence and hard information…’

(The Bishop of London, General Synod, July 2014)

From Anecdote to Evidence, the document summarising the research findings, has been scrutinised in this paper, especially its reporting of the statistical analysis of parish attendance and survey data from across the Church.

It has been shown that From Anecdote to Evidence systematically misrepresents or misinterprets the underlying report by David Voas & Laura Watt thereby exaggerating the usefulness of the findings for numerical growth:

1. The reported findings are consistently drawn from the analysis of self-reported qualitative growth, without considering the equivalent findings using the statistical data from parish returns.
2. The inflation in the self-reported growth is not mentioned, nor the possibility of bias (which is shown to be highly probable in this paper).
3. The warnings of Voas & Watt that causation is likely sometimes to work in reverse (growth causing change in the factor) are repeatedly ignored.
4. A correlation is described as ‘strong’ when in the Voas & Watt report it is weak.
5. A correlation is described as ‘significant’, misleading the general reader since, while this is true in the technical, statistical sense, the correlation is actually weak.
6. One of the factors for growth reported as a research finding, is actually present in the report by Voas & Watt only as a hypothesis, as yet untested.
7. One of the factors for growth reported as a research finding, is actually present in the report by Voas & Watt only as a comment in response to anecdotal evidence.
8. No mention is made of the highly significant result that the factors found to be associated with growth only account for a small proportion of the difference between growing and declining churches (only 10-25% of the variance was explained).

Estimation of the effect of using the identified factors as levers for the overall growth of the Church begins from the low base of having only explained so little of what makes the difference. The net effect must then be further reduced by taking account of:

• those factors where the relationship is not causal, or is reverse causal
• those factors which cannot be changed (e.g. demographics)
• the general inflation of self-reported growth
• the proportion of growth which is transfer between churches, with no net effect.

Therefore, according to the research, the increase in growth to be expected from the use of these factors will be nowhere near sufficient to halt the relentless generational decline, even if the resources could be found to move every lever as far as possible.

The Church has recently embarked on a wide-ranging programme of ‘Reform and Renewal’, led with considerable energy and resolve, and this has quite understandably been a great source of encouragement to many. However, the Church Growth Research is cited as the evidence base for the success of these plans, and From Anecdote to Evidence represents the level of understanding of the research among the senior leadership.

It has been estimated that it will be necessary to borrow at least £100m from the future, using Church Commissioners’ funds, in order to implement the Task Group proposals. This paper therefore calls into question the basis for considering this an investment likely to pay back a return, in terms of either finance or church growth. It also calls into question the From Evidence to Action initiative which is designed to encourage parishes to implement the research findings as presented in From Anecdote to Evidence.

Despite appearances, this is not meant to be a negative analysis, even though it asks the Church’s leaders to accept that their research has provided no answer to the question of how to achieve sufficient numerical growth to offset the continuing decline.

The analysis here implies there is a need for much more radical thinking and planning, not less. The questions go wider than ‘How can we increase attendance figures?’ to include ‘What are the reasons for decline?’ and ‘What is an appropriate ecclesiology for a national Church in today’s social context?’ That requires attention to be given to all aspects of the Church’s role in society. And it requires the questions to be asked with a positive, outward look towards the people of the parishes rather than an inward, anxious focus on institutional strength.

The Church has officially moved from delusion to reality on attendance figures. It now needs to face the reality of what its own growth research is saying, and of why it was felt necessary to portray it in a way which would only create another delusion.

Easter Saturday 2015