COMPARING CHURCH ATTENDANCE IN OCTOBER 2022 WITH 2019

A REPORT FOR THE DIOCESE OF GUILDFORD

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SUMMARY

1. Onsite attendance recovery from covid lockdown has continued, rising to 75% of 2019. It started from a very low base in 2020 and has not yet quite caught up with the average of other dioceses.

2. Recovery has been weaker among children than adults and in fresh expression rather than traditional church. Finding new ways to replace what has been lost and to grow church with families is probably a top priority.

3. Churches with a children's/youth/families minister have recovered more of their 2019 attendance than those without an assistant minister, though recovery is hampered in places by vacancies and the current recruiting challenges.

4. Online attendance is still significant, perhaps adding around another 17% to parish church attendance. Online does not detract from onsite attendance and may help grow it in future. Churches continuing online have recovered more of their 2019 onsite attendance than those not online.

5. The smallest churches have completely recovered their 2019 attendance, the larger churches have only recovered 72%.

6. Churches that have maintained or increased the number of services they offer have recovered their 2019 attendance levels. But the majority of churches have reduced the number of their services, and these are the ones with lower overall attendance in 2022.

7. It is possible that leadership energy debilitated by recent experience lies behind the inability to return to previous service and attendance levels. This looks especially true in multi-church incumbencies.

8. Significant new attendance growth in the coming year is entirely possible, as proved by those churches that have grown their attendance since 2019.

9. But it will not come without new initiatives from the churches and the diocese. Among other things, new growth may need churches to plant new congregations, develop their online offering, and prioritise reaching families; and the diocese to encourage new ways of providing church leadership. The most growth potential in the next few years may be in the large churches that have shrunk most through lockdowns, so a diocesan process to assist them may be especially productive.

BACKGROUND TO THIS REPORT

The aim is to compare average church attendance in October 2022 with the last pre-covid October of 2019. How far has attendance onsite recovered towards the 2019 level and how much is online church still being accessed? Five dioceses, of which Guildford is one, have asked their churches to enter their October attendance numbers immediately. This means we can see what is happening very quickly without having to wait about a further year before the 2022 statistics get published.

Church attendance would still have been depressed somewhat by covid – 3% of the population had covid at any one time in October - and some people were still wary of meeting in groups and crowds. But the journey to a new normal seems well advanced and so it is a good moment to take stock.

Of course, there has been no full 'return to normal' in society as a whole. Some behaviours have changed permanently – for example more people now work and shop from home. Online meetings and interactions are less frequent now than in lockdown but still a lot more common than beforehand. And a European war, high inflation, falling living standards and an energy crisis provide a new context for church life.

This report is a mix of straightforward reporting of our statistical analysis and deductions, advice and recommendations from it.

So, what has been happening to church attendance in the Diocese of Guildford in these tumultuous times and what lessons can be learned for the future?

RESPONSE RATE

For this study we have used data on 144 churches (68% of the churches in the diocese). The total number of churches responding to the request for October 2022 data was greater than this, but some churches could not be included in this study as either they had not responded in 2019 (so we could not compare their figures) or a church had included figures for another church in one of the years but not the other. Finally, we excluded data from a few churches that had reported no attendance in either 2019 or 2022 but, knowing the churches, we believe it was unlikely they had no attendance during October. We think this is an excellent response rate in the circumstances and it shows the practicality of collecting and analysing any 'Statistics for Mission' data in a short time-period in the future. We know of no reason why the remaining churches in the diocese should have moved differently in any systematic way.

HOW MUCH DO ATTENDANCE AVERAGES MATTER?

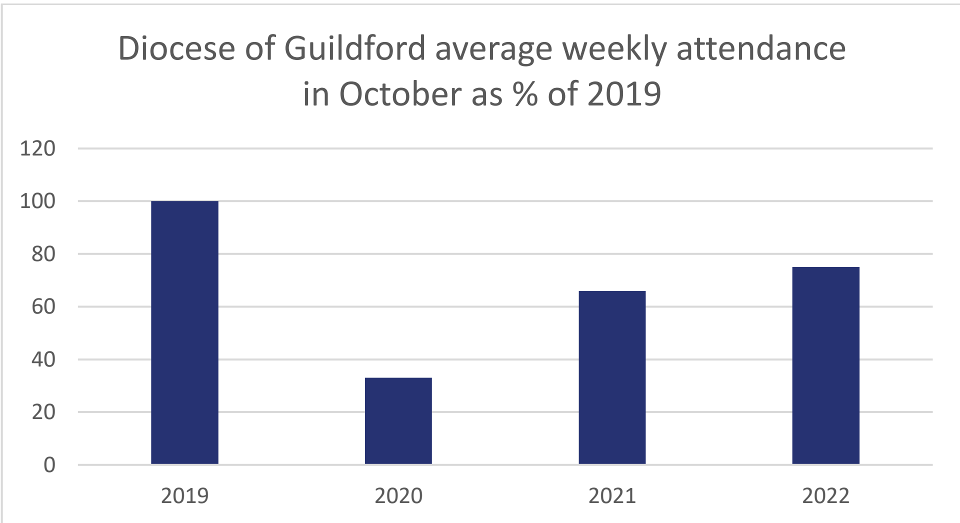
The mission of the Christian church is not so much to attract crowds to worship events as to make disciples and serve the Kingdom. But how do we know if we are fulfilling our mission effectively? Counting attendance is an important pointer, an indicator of the numerical size of the Body of Christ. It helps monitor our success in holding and making disciples. It can show where we are making and where we are losing ground. It can inform and challenge churches and dioceses about how we go about our mission in the future. Church attendance numbers do not tell us everything, but they can tell us quite a lot.

HAS ATTENDANCE RECOVERY BEEN CONTINUING THROUGH 2022?

Yes – the recovery has slowed but numbers onsite are still rising. Combining published 'Statistics for Mission' data with our estimate for October 2022 gives the following onsite all-age all-week attendance estimates expressed as a percentage of their 2019 counterpart.

October 2020	33%
October 2021	66%
October 2022	75%

This implies that average weekly attendance in October 2022 was about 14% higher than it was in 2021, a slightly faster recovery than the average of our five dioceses. The 75% level in 2022, however, is still behind the 78% average due to the steeper average initial drop in 2020.



Recovery in our sample of churches varied by the day and type of service and between adults and children. The third column expresses the 2022 attendance as a percentage of 2019.

	2019	2022	2022 as % 2019
Adult Sunday	11,332	8,845	78%
Adult Sunday fxC	321	188	59%
Adult Weekday	1,273	948	74%
Adult Weekday fxC	352	292	83%
Child Sunday	1,892	1,289	68%
Child Sunday fxC	164	153	93%
Child Weekday	276	105	38%
Child Weekday fxC	345	198	57%
Adults	13,278	10,273	77%
Children	2677	1745	65%
Sundays	13,709	10,475	76%
Weekdays	2246	1543	69%
Trad services	14,772	11,186	76%
Fresh expressions	1182	831	70%
Schools	3219	3222	100%
Total	15,954	12,018	75%
Total including online est	15,954	14,045	88%

*FxC is a fresh expression of church

Note that the weekday and fresh expressions numbers do not include people who also attended Sunday church, only those who are extra to the Sunday congregation. The school service attendance numbers are not included in the total figures.

HOW DO THE DIFFERENT COMPONENTS OF TOTAL ATTENDANCE COMPARE?

ADULTS ON SUNDAY

Attendance was 78% of 2019. However, Sunday services for adults are the ones most likely to be live streamed so the total attendance will have been more than this in 2022 (see page 7 below). If most online attendees were adults, then total adult attendance may well have been over 90% of the 2019 onsite-only level.

The recovery varies a lot by church size - the smaller the church, on average, the stronger the recovery. The smallest churches have completely recovered their 2019 attendance levels but the largest only average around 72% (see page 10).

Recovery also varies according to the number of services churches are offering. Overall, the churches in 2022 offered only 83% of the Sunday services of 2019. Churches with fewer services than they had in 2019 also had a smaller than average attendance recovery (see page 12).

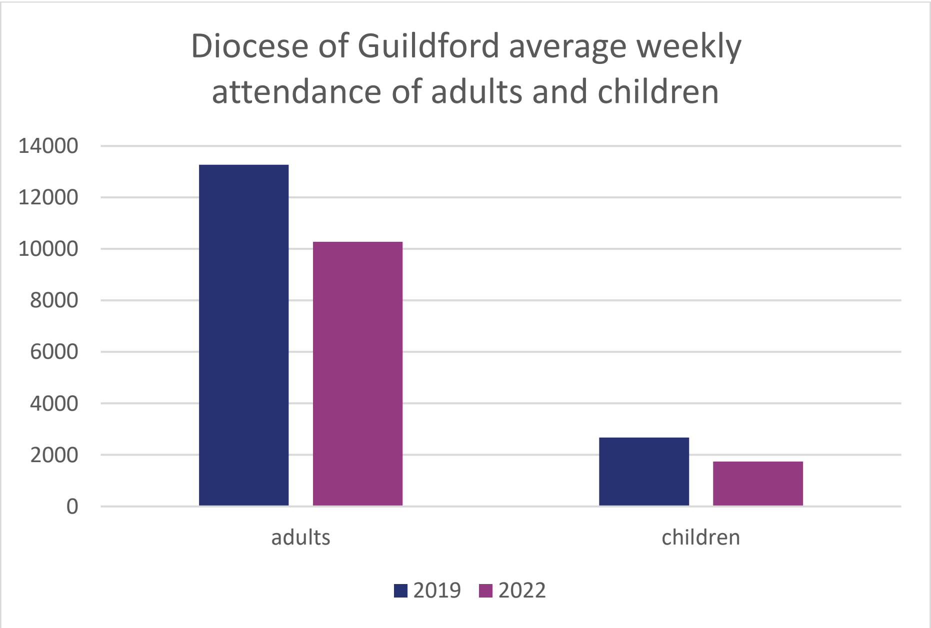
CHILDREN

Child attendance has suffered more than adult attendance. Weekly child attendance in 2022 was only 65% of 2019 compared with 77% for adults. The average for our five dioceses was 71.5% for children and 79.5% for adults. There is clearly a bigger rebuilding job still to face everywhere among children than there is among adults, and especially in Guildford Diocese.

Sunday attendance of children had recovered to 70% of the 2019 level but Weekday attendance was only 49%. The recovery in fresh expressions was at a similar level to traditional church, though much better on Sundays than weekdays.

The larger drop in child numbers also suggests that there will have been a weaker than average recovery among the younger adults as most are brought by parents. So, the average age of the adults will be somewhat higher in 2022 than it was in 2019.

This suggests to us that recovery of ministry among children and families should be a major priority in the diocese, and that resuming or starting child or family-friendly worship events would be integral to this.



WEEKDAY SERVICES

The recovery of attendance was weaker on weekdays than Sunday – 69% compared with 76% on Sundays. This is entirely because of the large drop in child weekday attendance, which was only 49% of the 2019 level in October 2022. So, the main losses seem to have been in services aimed at families and children. By the same token it may be that there is new growth potential from starting new services and fresh expressions of church for families on weekdays.

FRESH EXPRESSIONS

Attendance has not recovered as well as at traditional services and there has been a lot of churn. The reason is not that fewer people are attending each fresh expression of church but that there are fewer of them. In October 2019 there were 59 fresh expressions in 50 churches. In October 2022 there were 39 fresh expressions in 33 churches. 27 of the 50 churches with a fresh expression in 2019 no longer registered one in 2022, and 10 additional churches did so in 2022. The number of weeks out of the four that they met was:

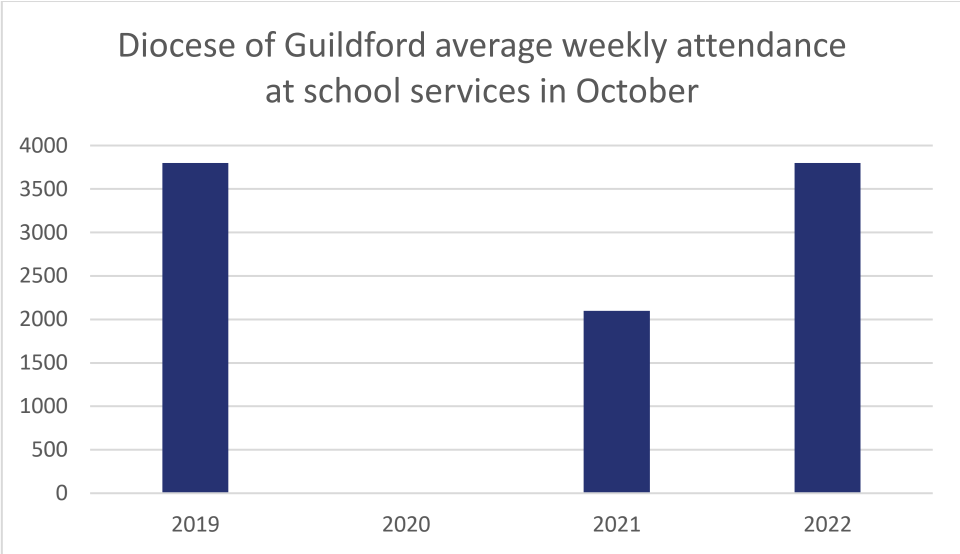
	2019	2022
Four times	9	4
Three times	9	10
Twice	11	10
Once	30	15

Average weekly attendance at a fresh expression was 20 in 2019 and 21 in 2022. The average attendance when they actually met was 41 in both years. So, the total was down because there were fewer fresh expressions of church functioning, not because the demand for them in any particular place had gone down. This clearly suggests that overall attendance will respond well to the planting of new fresh expressions and the resurrection of previous ones.

SCHOOL SERVICES

We felt it was a step too far to cover school services in any detail, but average weekly all age attendance in our sample of 144 churches was exactly 3,221 in both years. As school service attendance is very lumpy (400 one week, none the next etc) it is possible that this will change when more churches submit their 2022 returns. But school attendance has recovered well in all the dioceses we are looking at, and in fact adding up the dioceses puts the 2022 number slightly higher than 2019.

The children, of course, normally have no option but to attend, but at least this shows it is possible to return to 2019 attendance levels in one category of churchgoing. The recovery has been very brisk since the near-total 2020 lockdown and especially since October 2021. The graph puts together the published data for previous years with our sample estimate for 2022:



ONLINE ATTENDANCE

This is lower than in October 2021 but remains a substantial element. 70 out of 144 (49%) reported a 'Church at Home' (CAH) element in October 2022. Almost all of these appear to be an online version of a church service. This compares with 92 churches (64%) in 2021. 31 churches appear to have dropped their CAH in the course of the year, but 9 others appear to have started CAH. The proportion of Guildford churches remaining online looks higher than for some other dioceses.

Churches are asked to estimate how many people access their service online and almost all do make an estimate, though we have no means of knowing how accurate each estimate is. These estimates are meant to be of full views, not glances. But at least as the same question was asked in both the 2021 and 2022 enquiries there may be a level of consistency between the two. The 92 churches in 2021 between them estimated an average weekly CAH attendance of 3963, 42 people per church. The 70 churches with CAH in 2022 estimated an average weekly attendance between them of 2027, 29 people per church. It is no surprise that the average per church has come down as previous life patterns re-assert themselves. But it is striking that CAH (basically online) attendance was still a significant factor even in October 2022 when all restrictions were well behind us. The estimated online attendance adds 17% to total 2022 onsite attendance. Putting estimated online attendance together with the onsite numbers makes 2022 attendance 88% of the 2019 level.

What should the future be? Some churches have stopped their online offering due to the difficulty of improving the standard of what is offered, the lack of volunteers or feeling it was not a good use of time. Others may have ended their online option to force people back into the building. Does this work? And is it right that creating a good online option is not a priority for the recovery of the churches? The problem is that online may well be the only viable alternative for the remaining online worshippers? The data suggests this is the case – attending onsite is not an easy alternative for most of the remaining online attendees. The point is that onsite attendance has not recovered as well in churches that no longer have a CAH presence as it has in churches with a CAH alternative:

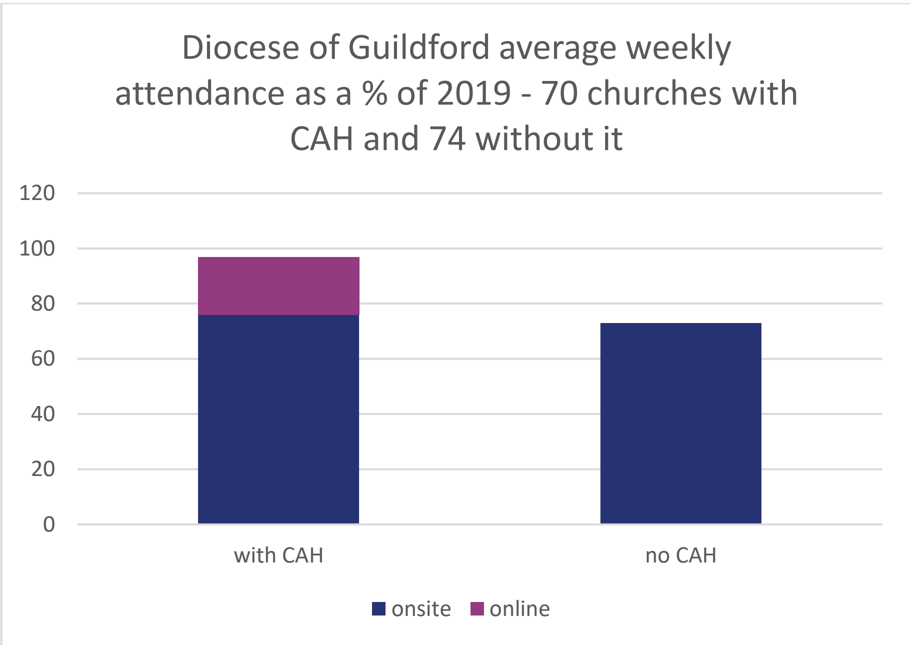
Onsite attendance in 2022 as % of 2019:

70 churches with CAH in 2022	76%	of 2019
74 churches without CAH in 2022	73%	of 2019

There were 30 churches with attendance under 100 in 2019 still with CAH in 2022 and their onsite attendance was 89% of 2019. The 40 churches over 100 in 2019 had 74% of their 2019 attendance onsite. So both size groups had better attendance recovery than similar sized churches without CAH.

This difference is despite the fact that on average the CAH churches are larger, and larger churches on average have recovered less well than smaller ones.

When the CAH numbers are added in, the 70 churches had a total attendance of 97% of 2019, compared with the non-CAH churches' 73%. This is too big a difference to forego lightly. The answer to poor quality online is to improve it not abandon it. If technical and expertise problems are the issue then diocesan help could make a big difference.



It seems, then, that remaining online attenders tend to be in the groups hard to bring into the building - the elderly and housebound, the covid-shy, those not available on Sunday mornings (most views now are subsequent not as live), church members who are ill or otherwise engaged that day, those who live too far away, and people looking for a church to belong to. This is why stopping the CAH offering is unlikely to bring many people back into the building.

However, the reduction in people accessing CAH more than offsets the increase in onsite attendance between 2021 and 2022. The churches report a net average weekly onsite increase of around 1500 from 2021 to 2022 but an estimated reduction in CAH attendance of around 1900. These are not all the same people – it looks as though a significant proportion of the reduced numbers using CAH have not made the transition to onsite worship. But this sobering estimate certainly suggests that it is by no means certain that total attendance has been rising at all. It looks likely that online attendance at the height of lockdowns was well in excess of 2019 onsite attendance so it is no surprise that the combined total has come down again as busy lives resumed. After the online peak, though, the disappointment is that it is being such a struggle even to return to 2019 attendance levels in the new onsite-online world.

Whether talking about parish churches, the cathedral or the other churches with a national or regional online reach, it should not be assumed that chalking up a view of the service means job done. Churches need to be clear about their aims online, and where possible, to connect with their online members and draw them into the rest of the body of Christ. All should be aiming at good practice for presenting online worship and for developing hybrid or blended congregations and pastoral care. Onliners should be members of and contributors to the worshipping group, not observers of it. Churches need to network, share expertise, and draw on diocesan help in order to develop their ministry and evangelism online. If the current online offering is inadequate, the solution is not to abandon it but to improve it.

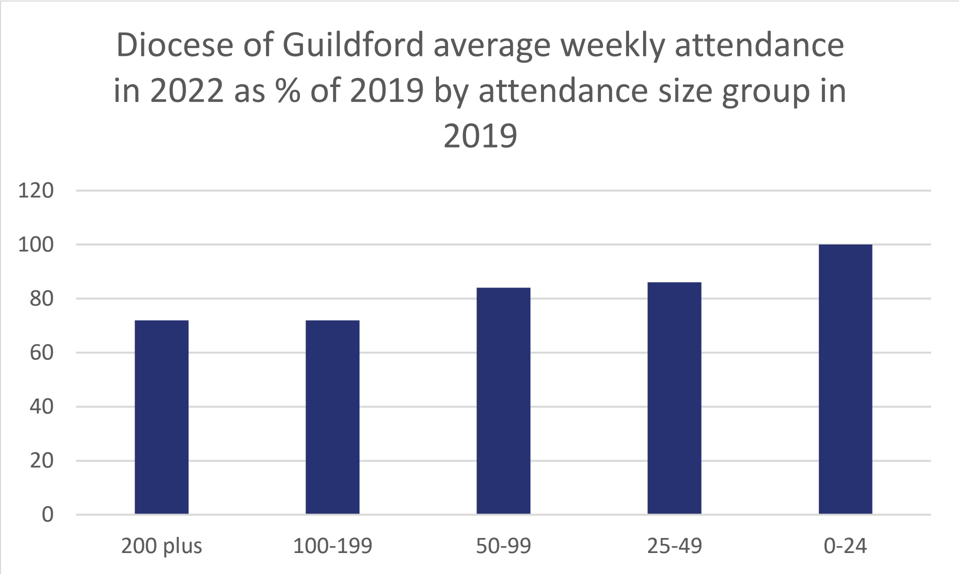
It seems that the public checking out websites as a way of choosing churches has been partly replaced by checking online services. For some people, online attendance is their route into onsite attendance. Enjoy the service for a few weeks, assess that the minister and congregation are people you would like to meet, and eventually you have the courage to come in person. In the same way that in the past churches without a church notice board or a church website would find it particularly hard to attract newcomers, so will churches without YouTube services. In the long term it is likely that churches with an online presence will be able to grow onsite attendance better than those without it. A new move to increase the proportion of churches offering online has the potential to kick start a further round of attendance recovery.

HAVE ALL TYPES OF CHURCH RECOVERED AT THE SAME RATE?

No! On average the smaller the church the better the recovery. There is a statistical phenomenon in data series subject to natural fluctuations whereby the smaller numbers appear to rise relative to the larger ones over time. But the difference is far greater than this phenomenon would explain, and churches do not naturally fluctuate in attendance numbers from say 25 to 200 anyway! The table shows up the contrast between churches of different sizes:

Av weekly attendance by size group in 2019	Churches	2019	2022	2022 as % 2019
200 plus	18	5,718	4,093	72%
100-199	45	6,062	4,364	72%
50-99	41	3,035	2,550	84%
25-49	20	723	625	86%
0-24	20	355	355	100%

The attendance at the larger churches with an average attendance of 100+ in 2019 was 28% down in 2022, but at the smallest churches attendance onsite had fully recovered its 2019 level. The larger churches are more likely to have an online element but even allowing for this the contrast is still sharp.



This size contrast is not specific to Guildford – it looks similar in other dioceses. It looks as though pastoral-sized churches in smaller communities held together by relationships have been much more resilient in the face of lockdowns and covid restrictions than programme model churches in gathered communities held together by activities.

It may be that the large, eclectic churches in the towns and cities found it harder to maintain contact with their scattered congregations through lockdowns and therefore harder to reassemble onsite congregations when that became possible. Smaller rural congregations, however, tended to belong to the same village community, did not lose touch in lockdown, and were able to re-connect in church more easily. In fact, onsite attendance numbers in small churches seem to have even risen slightly across the dioceses studied following the covid experience.

In addition, the large churches tend to have a higher proportion of children and their parents. Child numbers generally have had a weaker recovery than adult numbers.

A specific factor in Guildford may have been that Anglican churches were slower and more reluctant to re-start families ministry and services than were some other churches, including one or two prominent new independents. As a result, some families went elsewhere. This might help explain why the percentage recovery in 2020 was lower in Guildford (33%) than in other dioceses. Guildford also has a higher than normal proportion of large, eclectic churches with a previously large child and family ministry.

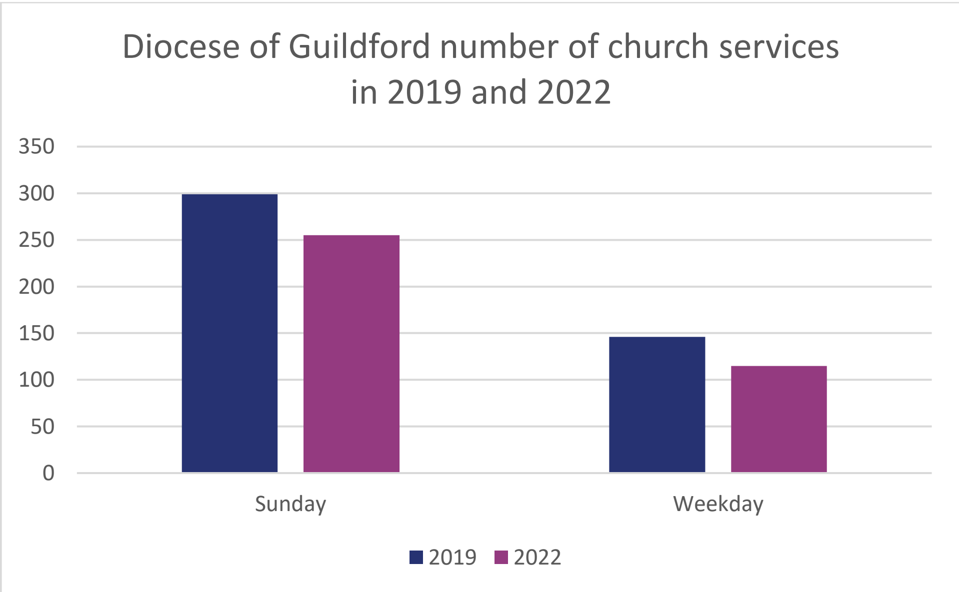
It looks sensible, therefore, to focus continued recovery help mainly on the large churches that have not recovered yet from their pandemic experience. Shrinkage is not inevitable in large churches – a few have managed to increase their attendance over 2019 and are listed in the appendix. They could be asked how they have achieved this, and the lessons learned shared with others. And churches where attendance has recovered weakly could be asked what their problems are – maybe staff illness and vacancies have had a big impact, maybe it is simply the dynamics of a large community.

WHAT IS HOLDING NUMBERS BACK?

Service Numbers

We have found that the churches overall have re-started onsite worship with fewer services than they had in 2019. It looks as though not many new services have been started or new congregations planted, but many churches have not re-started all the services they had before. Overall, there has been a 17% fall in the number of weekly services:

	2019	**2022**
Sunday	299	255
Weekday	146	115
Total	445	370 (83% of 2019)

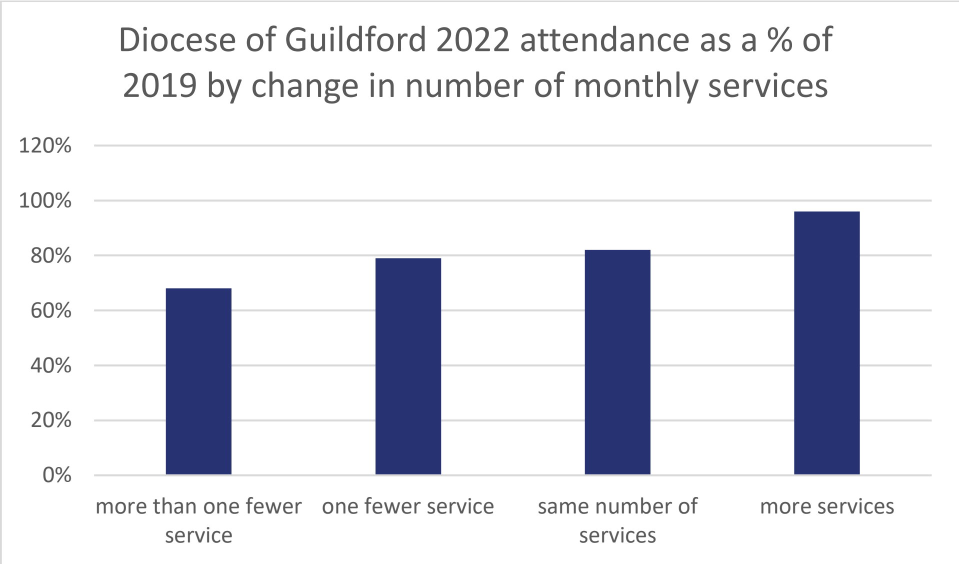


Are fewer services the result of lower take-up by churchgoers or do fewer services result in less church attendance? There is clearly a chicken and egg problem here, and some churches may have rightly taken the opportunity not to restart services that were no longer meeting a significant need.

But the main direction of causation is likely to be that fewer services means less attendance.

This certainly seems to be the case here as average weekly attendance has recovered much better in churches that have not reduced their services number:

	2022 as % of 2019	Number of Churches
At least two fewer services per month	68%	70
One fewer service	79%	18
Same number of services	82%	31
More services than in 2019	96%	25



This finding tells us the same thing as the analysis of fresh expressions – a large part of the reason why attendance numbers have not yet fully recovered is not a general lower demand for church services but a reduced supply of them. Just as the numbers attending the average fresh expression were the same in 2022 as in 2019 so the numbers attending the average church service in 2022 were down by less than appears at first sight. The diocese had 83% of the services and 75% of the attendance compared with 2019.

We found nine churches that had started not to have a service every Sunday. Five of them just cut out one Sunday, the others more. Their combined average weekly attendance in 2019 was 288 and in 2022 was 174, 60%. When their church service is no longer weekly, most people do not make a special effort the week their service is happening. Some are tempted to give up completely the first time they turn up at a locked building or else when they can't work out whether the service is happening this week or not. It becomes especially difficult to attract new people. In total only 12 of the 144 churches in the sample appear not to meet every Sunday, but that number has grown, which is a worrying sign for future attendance growth.

Just as planting new services and church communities grows the overall visible body of Christ, so cutting their number tends to shrink it. However, this reduction might just have created the conditions for a new wave of congregation and fresh expressions planting as churches find they have some spare capacity for new initiatives.

Online retrenchment

Churches that have stopped their online dimension seem not to have contributed anything to onsite attendance as a result, but have lost their online element of total attendance. If the churches abandoning CAH since October 2021 had not done so then the average estimates suggest they might have retained around another 850 to add to weekly attendance. But online retrenchment is also reversible– a new wave of online worship geared at the post-covid world has the potential to make a significant contribution to total church attendance in the new hybrid world.

Vacancies

In normal times the biggest shock churches experience is when the vicar leaves. Previous research on vacancies has shown that, though small churches where everyone knows everyone else tend not to suffer unduly, large programme-style churches tend to shrink quite a lot in vacancies lasting more than six months. (eg see 'Growing through a Vacancy' CPAS 2013). This is a major part of the reason why in recent decades, as vacancy lengths have expanded, larger churches have shrunk much more than small ones. So, what is the combined impact of the twin shocks of covid restrictions and a vacancy coming together?

We do not have a large enough sample of vacancy churches to say anything definitive, but what data we do have seems to follow this pattern. Total attendance at eight churches with under 50 attending in 2019 was slightly higher in 2022 despite them having gone through a vacancy as well as covid. They seem highly resilient to two major shocks at once.

Combined attendance at nine churches in the 50-99 attendance bracket with an intervening vacancy was 77% of the 2019 level in 2022, compared with 86% for those without a vacancy. For 12 churches of more than 100 average attendance in 2019 attendance in 2022 was 68% compared with 73% for those not experiencing a vacancy. So, these medium and large churches going through the double shock do seem to have shrunk rather more than the others, though the overall difference made seems on this evidence to be modest.

Although some medium and larger churches did not see attendance in 2022 drop below the 2019 level, some of those with the most spectacular attendance falls were indeed those that suffered vacancy as well as covid.

Dioceses know that vacancies are always with us. But working to minimise their impact through improving their handling and reducing their length would help to take this brake off attendance recovery.

Assistant staff working with under 16s and families

Large numbers of churches in Guildford Diocese employ people in this ministry. Could it be that employed workers tend to have spent their covid era time creating content rather than maintaining relationships as volunteers from the congregation might have done? This would be an aspect of the programme church problem with lockdowns and re-starting. Also, of the 48 churches identified in the 144 sample with a worker in 2019, 11 had lost the worker by 2022. Has that had a further negative effect, churches geared to a professional model not having the professional there to deliver? This would be akin to a clergy vacancy.

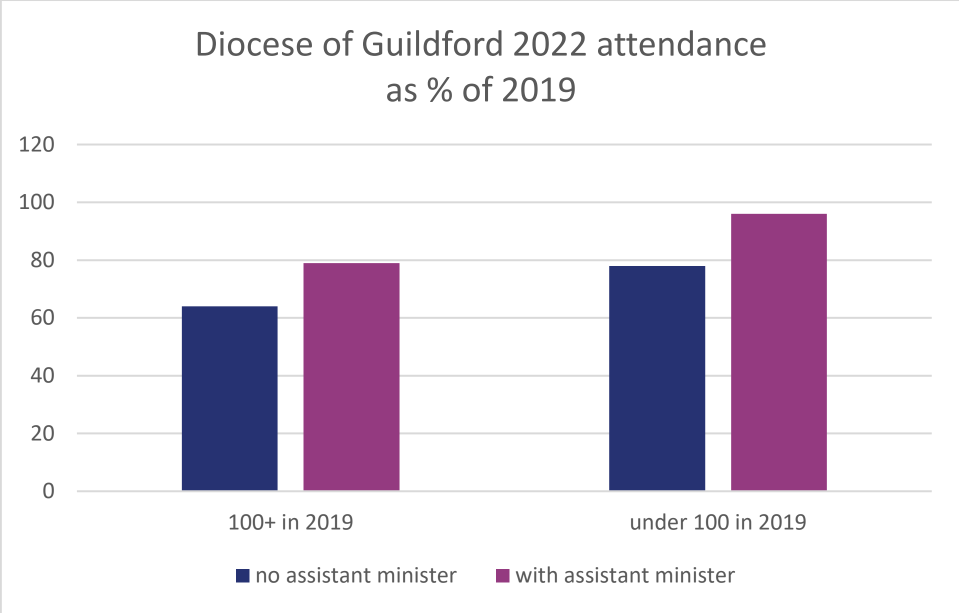
Or, has having paid staff helped attendance recovery as would naturally be hoped?

We can't prove any of these theories from the statistics but we can show associations and draw inferences. We here test churches with and without a worker against all-age attendance rather than child attendance as children generally come with parents or carers attached and the all age data is easier to hand. The results for churches with 100+ attendance in 2019 are:

	2019 attendance	**2022 attendance**	**2022 as % of 2019**
37 churches no worker	4,314	2,755	64%
8 churches lost worker by 22	1,149	806	70%
28 churches worker both years	6,317	4,896	78%
Total for 73 churches	11,780	8,457	72%

And the results for churches with 50-99 attendance in 2019 are:

	2019 attendance	**2022 attendance**	**2022 as % of 2019**
30 churches with no worker	2151	1,698	79%
11 churches with worker	884	852	96%
Total for 41 churches	3,035	2,550	84%



*assistant minister employed in children's and youth ministry

So, the result looks clear cut – attendance recovery looks significantly stronger in churches with a worker. For 100+ churches the difference in 2022 attendance is between 78% and 64% of 2019, and for 50-99 churches the difference is between 96% and 79% of 2019 attendance.

It could be argued that the go-ahead churches likely to recover better would also naturally employ assistant staff, but the much more likely conclusion is that the assistant staff have indeed on average, maybe not in every case, made a significant positive difference to the recovery rate.

Leadership arrangements

We have developed the suspicion from conversations and anecdotes around the dioceses we are working with that recovery may have been weaker in churches sharing a vicar than in those of a similar size that do not share. Have churches led by single-church stipendiaries, part time clergy or Focal Ministers recovered better? We wonder if multi-church incumbents may have been less willing and able to restore all their pre-covid services or to start new ones as they feel too thinly stretched anyway. Those focussed on just one church are more likely to develop and less likely to retrench.

From a list provided by the diocese we found data on 47 multi-church incumbency churches across the size range. For churches with attendance of under 50 in 2019 recovery in these churches was about the same as in other churches of the same size. But for churches of 50 or more there is a very significant difference. The ten 100+ churches have only recovered half their attendance compared with three quarters for those not sharing an incumbent.

Size group	Number	2019	2022	2022 % 2019	Others
0 to 24	11	167	163	98%	102
25 to 49	13	473	410	87%	86
50-99	13	892	649	73%	89
100 plus	10	1,628	826	51%	75
Total	47	3,160	2048	65%	78

Moreover, the theory that this might be connected with multi-church incumbencies reinstating fewer services than others seems to be correct. These 47 churches had 77% of 2019's number of services in 2022 compared with 83% for other churches. 35 of the 47 had lower attendance in 2022 and they only had 72% of the services they used to have. The 12 churches with higher attendance, almost all small ones, had exactly the same number of services in 2022 as in 2019.

Because of a limited sample size this evidence is more suggestive than conclusive. But it certainly merits a closer look and a comparison with some other dioceses. And it is not exactly a surprise to have it confirmed that the more overstretched clergy are the weaker the attendance recovery of the churches they lead. There are alternatives to ever larger incumbencies as the number of stipendiary posts slowly falls. One or two dioceses, for example, are now appointing large numbers of unpaid Focal Ministers each to lead a single church.

It is possible that a similar 'exhausted-overstretched' problem might be affecting the clergy of some of the largest churches in the diocese. If so, it may be worth a convener exploring with them alternative leadership structures within their churches that release the energy and leadership potential of a greater number of people – for example by giving full responsibility for a service's development or planting to someone who otherwise might simply be the vicar's helper across the board. This would be analogous to the Focal Minister arrangements being implemented elsewhere.

ATTENDANCE AND MEMBERSHIP

Membership of the worshipping community did not fall as far in the lockdown period as did attendance in the buildings. The Church of England estimates that its worshipping community fell by only 13% from 2019 to 2021 compared with a 29% fall in October attendance. The continued high levels of covid and other illnesses in the autumn of 2022, combined with some churches meeting on fewer Sundays and a continued diffidence among some to risk meeting together probably means that the size of the worshipping community is much nearer the 2019 level than is average attendance. It will be interesting in the new year to check the 2022 worshipping community figures against 2019. We would expect the child membership to be down significantly, but maybe the adult membership by not so much.

WHAT CAN PARISH CHURCHES DO TO KEEP GROWING IN THE POST-LOCKDOWN WORLD?

Is it inevitable that an ageing church with less energy, fewer habitual churchgoers because they have lost the habit and fewer children because they are less well catered for, will continue to decline? Has covid simply compressed ten years of inevitable decline into three?

Such a view can be strangely comforting as it absolves church leaders of responsibility – creating a view that there is little we can do, and decline is not our fault.

The statistical evidence says the opposite – numbers grow when appropriate provision is made and shrink when it is withdrawn. This is true, for example, in relation to the number of weeks a month that churches are open, to the number of services offered, and to the availability of child-friendly services, fresh expressions and online services. The problem (and the solution) seems to lie at least as much in the 'supply' of church as in the demand for it.

So, we suggest the following priorities:

1. Many of us possibly needed a quieter period to recover our vision and energy after a bruising few years. We needed to prune the least fruitful elements of the old in order to create the ground for the new. Now is the time for new outreach and worship to be planned and birthed, probably focussed on families. This is the demographic whose attendance has been hardest hit but which is still the most responsive to new churchgoing opportunities. The Church of England's Growing Faith Network is developing new resources to help churches with this, such as their Kitchen Table Project. So:
Plant a new congregation or service

2. Some churches will need to start afresh with their families ministry. School congregations, though, have recovered already to their 2019 level. For many churches, the local schools will be the place to start. So:
Look to develop new worshipping community out of the local school communities

3. We have shown that online is now an extra to onsite, not an alternative. It holds some to the church community and attracts others into it. So:
Do online well, which means online viewers becoming community members

4. The times are still fluid, new patterns of life are still forming. Many churches will still be aware of people who have not yet returned to churchgoing. Make a list and do some visiting and inviting. It seems an exceptionally good time to hold 'come to church' or 'back to church' invitation events and services. Also, it looks like the nexus of recent events has opened up some people to spiritual enquiry, so it is also a fruitful time for enquirers courses like Alpha. So:
Invite the interested, re-invite the lapsed and share the faith with seekers.

5. Larger churches that have not regained their 2019 attendance levels may be unaware this is part of a general trend. Network with others in a similar situation for learning and inspiration. A 'Larger Churches Process' driven by a diocese has helped to grow large churches in various dioceses in the past (**Larger churches look to strengthen community & belonging and once more take advantage of their large open front doors that lockdowns closed for so long)**

6. Yet there is still the underlying problem of the ever-increasing demands on the slowly shrinking number of stipendiary clergy, who have born the heat of the covid day and on whom it may be unfair to place further burdens and expectations. Even more than before, we need to release the energy of a wider group of leaders, to create more realistic job descriptions for the clergy and to embed leadership within local church communities and congregations rather than positioning it outside them in the form of multi church or mega-church incumbents. At the same time, financial problems in some churches and dioceses may require less paid leadership and more unpaid.
Consider changing the leadership model to bring in fresh energy, share the loads, and create new planting opportunities