

## Service Transcript Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> May 2022

Welcome, Notices, Birthday Box

### Intro Words

The Lord is God, the Lord is One.

***Give praise and honour to the Lord.***

Praise to God, the one Creator;

***he tells us to call him Father!***

Praise to God, the only Saviour;

***his self-giving love has won us!***

And praise the ever-present Spirit

***whose life and power and gifts surround us.***

To Father, Son and Spirit, praise!

***The Lord is God, the Lord is One!***

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### Prayer

**137 God of glory we exalt You name**

**1590 We see the Lord**

### Thy Kingdom Come

#### NOTICE SLIDE

So TKC is upon us. If you are not already praying then resources are on our website, particularly the daily notes which can be downloaded from our website. There are also daily videos which appear both on our Facebook page. If you don't do Facebook, you can go on to the TKC website and view them there. Our Prayer Meeting next Saturday on Zoom will be TKC themed and we will be concluding this season at our Pentecost Service next Sunday.

#### THE GREAT COMMISSION

As I have said before, we are emphasising this season as being something we pray for with the intention of being led by the Lord to take action. The Lord don't call us to pray, He commanded us to go and that's why I've put up the slide we had last week on The Great Commission.

As part of the body of Christ, we are called to be doers of the word and go where Jesus calls us. Some find that daunting. Yet we are called to go. It may not be far. Some of us had the opportunity to go on Friday – and that was as far as the church to Tea and Cake. TKC is about praying for friends, neighbours or colleagues, but also having the intent to be like Christ and speak like Him around others.

HARWICH HARBOUR. We often go down to Landgaud and see the ships. They are amazing to see, but they weren't made so that they would hang around the dock with people admiring them: they exist to travel long distances because they are only useful and making money when they leave port and take their goods to other lands. They are made to move goods over long distances. That's what their purpose is. They are not made for the harbour but to travel the seas. For us as

God's people we are called to go to others, not sit around in church, however valuable worship is to us. We are made to go. The official TKC song by Andy Flanagan focuses on it. Here it is to sit and listen to.

#### PRAYERS

Let's bring our TKC prayers before the Lord.

- We pray for our "five"
- Pray that the Lord will envision us as to what He can do this TKC
- Pray for the regular contact activities we will be starting during the TKC period – *Tea & Cake*, and *Home Craft*.
- Pray about how we may be a witness to our neighbours, friends & family on a day to day basis.

### 1819 Hear the call of the kingdom

#### Int. Prayers

#### UKRAINE

We continue to be concerned by the war in Ukraine. Here's a report from BMS World Mission

#### BMS REPORT

#### UKRAINE

- Pray for the work of the Ukrainian Churches and other agencies within Ukraine and surrounding countries. Pray that the Lord's love, compassion and mercy will fill their hearts and that peaceful solutions to this conflict will be reached.
- Pray for the people of Ukraine as they grieve for their country, for loved ones lost and for the loss of their livelihoods. Pray that God will comfort them and sustain them.
- Pray for those fleeing Ukraine, that their paths will be clear. Pray that they will find warm welcomes and safe refuge wherever they go. Pray for Ukrainian families now arriving in Felixstowe.
- Pray for an end to the conflict between Ukraine and Russia
- Pray for nations across the world such as Lebanon, Bangladesh and Tunisia who are at risk of major food insecurity as a consequence of the Ukraine war. Pray that God will provide for them.

#### THE PLATINUM JUBILEE

- Pray for peaceful and joyful celebrations that will draw communities together.
- Pray that we will develop better relationships with our neighbours.

#### MRBC

- Pray for our two new outreach projects, Tea and Cake and Home Craft.
- Pray for Walton Parish Nursing: for our Parish Nurses, for the Volunteers, and the activities: Exercise Classes, No Labels, Fizzability. Pray for the clients too.
- Pray that we will know the Lord's presence and guidance as we seek a new Pastor.
- Continue to pray that the Lord will provide the resources, financially and in terms of people as we seek to move forward.
- Pray for those experiencing poor health from Covid, Long Covid and other health issues. Pray too for those still shielding.

### 895 Lord I come to You

## Reading

### **Isaiah 6:1-13**

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;  
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.”

Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar.

With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”  
And I said “Here am I. Send me!”

He said, “Go and tell this people:

“‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’ Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”

Then I said, “For how long, Lord?”

And he answered:

“Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken. And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land.”

## **Growing back stronger**

### STUMP

Here’s a picture of the stump of an oak tree. Before you say “how tragic” and give me some tuff about how bad it is that trees are being felled, I need to tell you that this tree was felled as part of a system of woodland management that is thousands of years old and is an excellent way of producing timber whilst conserving the natural environment .

### COPPICE

This is a coppice woodland. It is a type of managed woodland that allows the forest to be felled and allowed to regenerate naturally so the trees are harvested again and again without needing to replant. That’s why the trees have multiple trunks. Coppiced trees usually grow fastest for the first 50 years or so but then grow more slowly, so they are usually felled every 50 to 70 years according to what size wood is required. It’s regarded as a very environmentally friendly form of

woodland management as many rare species are conserved by management as well as young trees consuming more CO<sub>2</sub> than mature ones.

This method of management also extends to other woody plants like fruit trees, vines and roses where pruning improves productivity. Coppicing is just drastic pruning with a chainsaw!

## REGENERATING STUMP

Why the forestry management lesson? I gave you a rather depressing sermon last week about the decline of church. The “death” of churches in many areas is troubling but not new – we have been talking about it for as long as I can remember. The reasons for it are complex but I don’t think it would be wrong to generalise by saying that our society has changed rapidly in that time and church has not responded to it effectively. Some attribute it fatalistically to the “mysterious” will of God, others blame the permissive society, atheism, materialism, the media, the education system and everything else associated with modernity. Or are we responsible for our own demise as church?

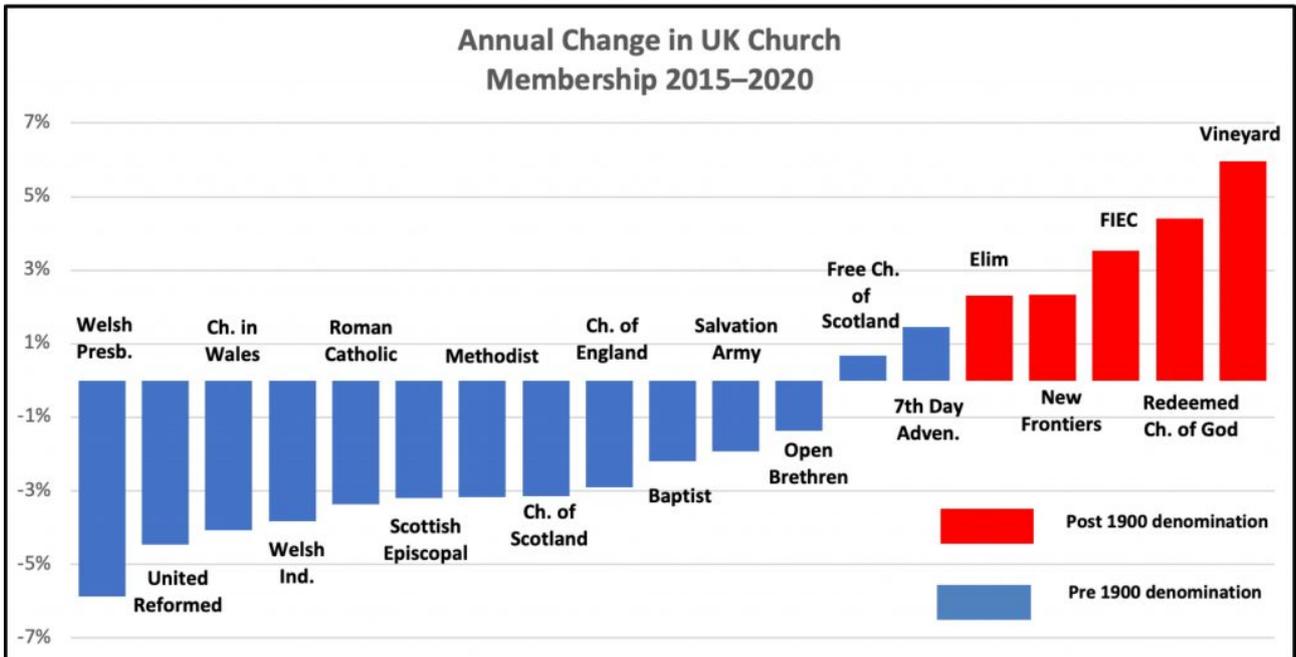
Last week I pointed out that much of the decline of the church in the West in general and the UK in particular can be found paralleled in the Bible in both testaments. Isaiah wrote at a time when the Jews, the people of God lived in prosperous times, but allowed themselves to be polluted by foreign gods, and by their materialism. But because they were prosperous, they considered themselves blessed as the people of God and ignored their own double standards. Like the northern kingdom Israel, it was a place where the poor were exploited, power abused and justice lacking. Does that sound familiar?

And the Jews of Isaiah’s time – the people of God – what was their response? Negative even when the nation went downhill. It was eventually wiped out in 586BC with a significant number taken into captivity in Babylon.

As you know, I like others have done and are doing, used this as a parallel to warn ourselves as church at this present time that we are in a decline that may render many churches and whole denominations extinct very soon. If you are thinking I’m being overly dramatic, then remember, some of us have been talking about it for the last 50 or 60 years. The questions is for all of us are: Have we been listening? Have we responded to the warning signs? Sometimes yes, but in my opinion, most of the time, no and the statistics show bear that out.

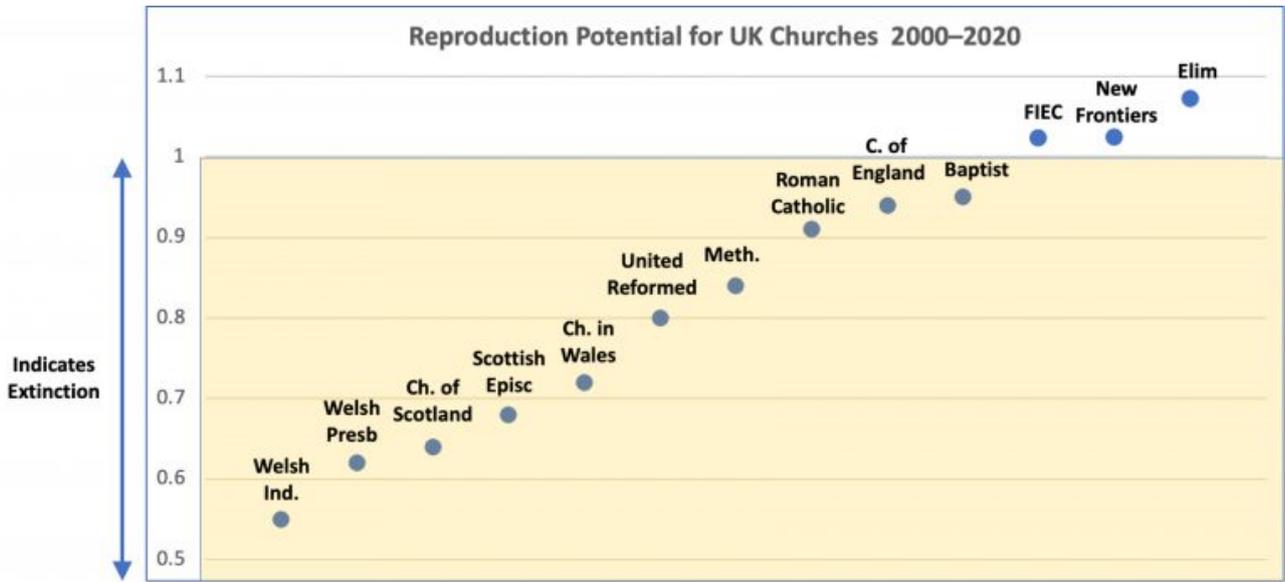
I wasn’t going to say much more than that, but this week the magazine Christianity Today discussed a report by a mathematician called John Hayward who has mapped the numerical decline of church members in denominations in Britain in the period 2015 to 2020. I may add, that doesn’t include the pandemic. Here’s the GRAPH of percentage decline of some of the larger denominations.

The denominations most in freefall are what he called the “traditional” (pre-1900 founded) denominations. Even the Baptists, which showed low growth a decade ago are now showing signs of decline - remember, this are pre-pandemic figures.



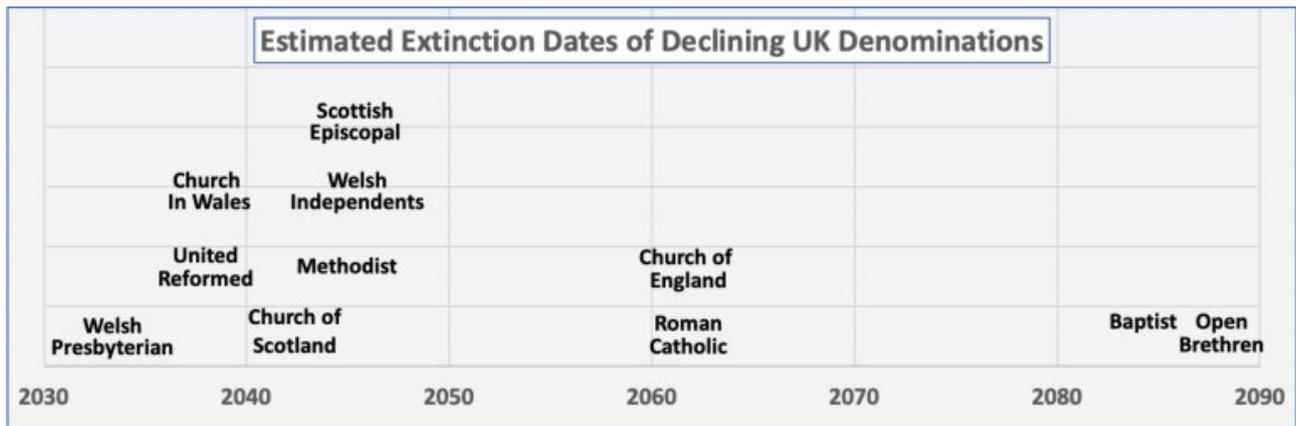
To be fair, this uses percentages, not raw numerical figures, so some of these denominations still have many members. And of course, there are some denominations still growing and I'll come back to them.

He then uses the R number, which shows reproduction potential. It was used by covid researchers to show growth in the virus. Over 1 shows rapid growth, less than 1 shows decline. Unlike Covid, a low R number is bad for churches as it means they are shrinking in numbers. These are figures for the first 20 years of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. They are pre-covid. I wonder what they look like now?



Again this shows that some well known denominations are significantly contracting – all of them older “traditional” denominations. The lower the R number under 1 the more rapid the decline. That’s good if it’s Covid, bad if it’s church.

Hayward then worked the decline figures back over 50 years and then projected forward when he would expect extinction would occur for each denomination. Here are the figures.



I've got to say, that this parallels many studies carried out over many years. None of this is new. We have known of this for some time. Hayward's work just brings us up to date. Many denominations will not be here in 50 year's time, which will include most major Welsh denominations. I suspect that what will happen as they become too small that they will merge with a larger denominations e.g. the Methodists with the Cof E, URC with Baptists.

The Baptists have a lot more hope attached to them and they do have considerable time left to reverse what is presently a slow decline. For us, the challenge remains as last week, are we going to commit ourselves to mission and growth, which will be spiritually costly, or are we going to be fatalistic and let it happen.

We could say that surely these denominations could make efforts to reverse the decline. Those in leadership have tried. I'm old enough to remember all the great evangelism initiatives and research over the last 40 or 50 years! It's barely dented the rate of decline in many denominations, even knowing that stuff like this has been collected for half a century now. That's another for the reflection and discussion section this week – did you know about this? Have we taken it seriously? Should we take it seriously now? In that case, what should we do about it?

Today's message is short and simple. We all know what happened to Judah – it was physically, economically and politically laid waste. Church, welcome to your future – to be spiritually laid waste – perhaps! Perhaps not. God is always faithful to His promises. In Christ, God's Kingdom is here, it is advancing still even if in the battle some of the church falls.

This is where coppicing or pruning comes in. However the church is cut down or cut back, a stump, a remnant will always remain. God says this to Isaiah in 6:10

VERSE

*And though a tenth remains in the land,  
it will again be laid waste.  
But as the terebinth and oak  
leave stumps when they are cut down,  
so the holy seed will be the stump in the land."*

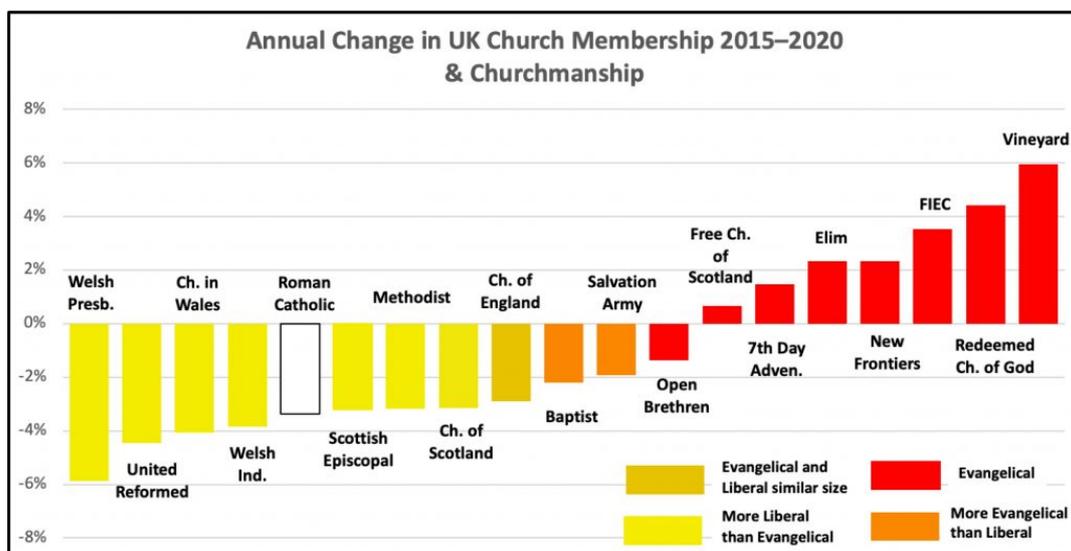
Israel was about to get laid waste by the Assyrians. They were ultimately going to fail to take Judah. Nine-tenths of the land area and population of the historic people of Israel was going to be laid waste and the people deported to Assyria, and culturally diluted, never to return.

I'm sure the Jews – the tenth left thought themselves fortunate and blessed – even though their land was left a mess and their economy shattered. They had time to respond but they were doomed too because they would not repent; they would not change. The same happened to Judah and the people exiled.

### REGENERATING STUMP

But in the final sentence we see that this is not the end. There is going to be a stump left to regenerate. 80 years later the exiles returned and the nation of Judah was restored. There is a lot about stumps in Isaiah – I preached on chapter 8 last. Stumps can produce amazing new woodlands as any coppicer will tell you. One stump even produced the Messiah!

Church seems to me to be like Judah. We are heading for the extinction of most of our traditional denominations. Is there hope. Yes. Much of traditional church may be reducing to a stump; parts may have suffered dieback and seem to be headed for the chainsaw treatment, but there are fresh shoots appearing too.



Let's go back to John Hayward. As you can see, there are some denominations at the present time, who are doing well thank you very much. Numerically they are not be large, but they are growing, especially newer denominations. Why's that do you think? That's also for your reflection and discussion this week. Elim, Vineyard and New Frontiers are all in the Pentecostal/Charismatic tradition and FIEC are strongly but traditionally Evangelical. And new shoots are appearing in the stumps of older denominations. The growth centres in Anglican and Baptist churches are also within the evangelical-charismatic axis, where congregations are younger, and often churches are more innovative.

### TITLE

It's a Biblical principle. If the tree doesn't grow well, if the vine is unproductive, then it is going to wither and die. If the church is not reproducing that is, producing new fruit, rather than swapping it by people moving between churches, then extinction is inevitable.

What's the solution? Get the tree surgeon in! We have a God who prunes. Allow Him to prune out what is unproductive in the church, to allow the productive to grow back and thrive, because it will grow back stronger. The God who prunes it out is God of the remnant and who is energising that remnant, by His Spirit to bring new growth. And churches growing now are either ones which don't yet require pruning, or ones which have come out of stumps.

We shouldn't find that new growth surprising, because it was out of the stump of Jesse, a royal line that hadn't exercised kingship in generations, that God raised the One who was the Saviour of not just the Jews, but of all those would believe and trust in Him and experience his transforming power.

That's what we need to be doing in the post-covid world. Literally going back to our roots. I don't find it surprising then that the most growing churches are all ones that emphasise a living faith and attempt to communicate it to the current generation with whatever means they have at their disposal.

TKC TITLE

This is Thy Kingdom Come week. It's good to pray for new growth, new people, new opportunities. But it is also time to reflect on what's dead and needs pruning too, in our lives and in our church to make Christ truly relevant in our worship and witness.

So my conclusion is that there is hope. We should allow God to, prune us and shape us into being a people of hope, not of despair and disappointment. To allow us to be imaginative about our faith, allow our message to be truly relevant, to scratch where people itch, and to answer questions that people are asking. In doing so, we allow the Spirit to use us to change lives. We will come back stronger if we do so.

It can happen, it can be done. The faithful remnant always comes back stronger. What do we do? We pray – let's use the opportunities this week to do just that.

Lets' pray.

Father we have to accept that this has been a difficult time for Your church in this land. It's been a difficult time for just a church, but it serves only to remind us that we are living in a part of the world where the church of Jesus Christ is in sharp decline.

Lord, we lament this loss, knowing that we as Your people have been the problem and these days have been difficult and painful for us. Thank you that you bring hope to the remnant who are willing to be that faithful remnant. Father prune further as necessary so that genuine new growth comes through others accepting You. Jesus, change our attitudes to bring them in line with who you are. Holy Spirit, empower us to be a people and a church who attract those who don't know You like a spiritual magnet.

We ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen.

**1757 Everyone needs compassion**

Benediction

## For Reflection and Discussion

*Read Isaiah 6:1-13*

*It may be useful to look at this before you start this study:*

<https://churchmodel.org.uk/2022/05/15/growth-decline-and-extinction-of-uk-churches/> by John Hayward.

1. How aware are you of the decline of the Christian faith in Britain in the last half century or so? How seriously should we take studies like the one above? (It's one of many over the years that describe the same trend.)
2. Why do you think churches have contracted so rapidly and now some denominations face extinction? Is it just the faithlessness of the present generation, or does the church bear responsibility for it's own demise?
3. Last week we saw that even by the end of the first century, churches were in deep trouble and some facing extinction in the Roman province of Asia (Western Turkey). What was happening to the rest of the church in the world at that time? We have lamented to contraction of church in our land, but what is going on in the rest of the world? What does that tell us about the purposes of God?
4. We see in Isaiah 6:13 that the stump grows back, but that only happens when the tree is properly cut back by the forester (or vines grow better if they are pruned – John 15). What do you think that entails for the church in our day? What should we do to allow God to produce new growth in us by His Spirit?