

Our church in 2024 – A time for hope

A comparison with 2023 and 2019 for church attendance in October and at Christmas

A report for the diocese of Oxford

Dr Bev Botting (Data Analyst, Diocese of Oxford,)

1. Summary

- 1.1. This report updates the earlier report that reported October 2024 attendance, and now includes all returns made when the online parish return system closed to the dioceses. It also includes an analysis of attendance at Christmas 2024.
- 1.2. Whilst attendance in October 2024 has not continued the large percentage increases seen in the years since the pandemic, attendance as measured by the Average Weekly Attendance (AWA) saw a small increase of 2.7% between October 2023 and October 2024 overall in the Diocese of Oxford. This suggests that while we are now at the end of what we have called 'recovery' after the pandemic there is hope that it is possible to continue to grow our church through new initiatives and learning from one another.
- 1.3. The small increase in attendance of 2.7% between October 2023 and October 2024, was also reflected in a separate analysis comparing 2024 October attendance figures with those for 2019; this showed attendance in 2024 at 86% of the 2019 level, compared with 84% in 2023.
- 1.4. If the pre-pandemic trends in attendance (from 2014 to 2019) had continued, our estimates show that in 2024 Adult AWA was 0.9% above the projected pre-pandemic trend. Child AWA exceeded the projected trend figure in 2023 and in 2024 was 19.5% above the projected trend. This large increase, however, is mainly due to the trend in child attendance decreasing prior to 2019 at a much faster rate than for adults.
- 1.5. The increase between 2023 and 2024 was higher for children at 3.4% than for adults at 2.6%. Nevertheless, this follows a few years when recovery was greater for adults than for children, so compared with 2019 figures, adults AWA was 87% of that in 2019 compared with children AWA being 78% of the 2019 figure.
- 1.6. The smallest and small churches saw the biggest increase between 2023 and 2024.
- 1.7. The increase in attendance was not seen across all archdeaconries, with Dorchester seeing a small decrease in AWA, showing the fragility in this small overall increase.
- 1.8. Despite an overall decrease in attendance, Dorchester saw an increase in their child AWA between 2023 and 2024. Largely the churches showing an increase in their child AWA were associated with a new youth minister or new clergy with an emphasis on working with children. Some of the churches in the Archdeaconry that saw the biggest decreases in child

AWA were associated with losing a children and family worker or had moved into an interregnum during the period.

- 1.9. Between 2023 and 2024 the number of services held across the diocese remained at the 2023 level. However, some churches increased their number of services and others reduced them. On average if churches reduced their number of services between 2023 and 2024, this was associated with a fall in their AWA, whereas on average if they increased their number of services this was associated with an increase in their AWA of 9 extra people for each new service.
- 1.10. Comparing 2024 Christmas attendance for the linked church records with their figures from 2023 shows a decrease between 2023 and 2024 of 4.6%. However, given that Christmas attendance is much more subject to variation than just about anything else we measure, thought to be due to the day of the week and weather, and given that 2023 was a year when we had higher attendance likely due to Christmas Eve being on a Sunday, it is not surprising that we saw this decrease between 2023 and 2024.

2. Background to the report

- 2.1. The main purpose of this exercise was to compare attendance in October 2024 and at Christmas 2024 with 2023 and with the last 'normal' pre-pandemic year of 2019, to see what could be learned about how church attendance has changed over this period, and to help understand how our churches could grow and develop in the future.
- 2.2. This report is a mix of objective statistical analysis and some contextual discussion following conversations with colleagues in the Diocese.

3. Response rate

- 3.1. This report updates the earlier report published in January 2025 which was based on 486 churches that reported their October attendance during November 2024.
- 3.2. The original response rate to our request to complete their October 2024 figures earlier than usual was 70%. By the time the online parish return system was closed to the diocese on 28 March 2025 we had achieved a 94 % response rate. This is a magnificent achievement, and we are very grateful to those involved in providing their church's data.
- 3.3. For this study I have linked information for 659 churches in the comparison between October 2023 and October 2024. This represents 82% of the 808 churches in the diocese. In the comparisons between 2019 and 2024, I linked information for 618 churches which represents 76% of all churches in the diocese. The total number of churches responding to our request for October 2024 data was even greater than this at 94%, but some responses could not be included in this study as either they had not responded in 2019 or 2023 (so we could not link 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 2023 but, knowing the churches, we believe it was unlikely they had no attendance during October. We cannot see any biased pattern in the churches for whom we have linked records, so we have confidence in these findings.

4. Does attendance matter?

- 4.1. 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 one 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 disciples. 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.

5. How does attendance in 2024 compare with 2023?

- 5.1. **Measured by AWA, our linked records show that there has been a very small increase in attendance in our diocese of 2.7% between October 2023 and 2024.** The measure 'Average weekly attendance figures are the average over the first four week of October, including weeks where the number is zero. If this increase was seen across all our churches in the diocese, it would represent an extra 1000 people attending our churches. This may not be 1000 people new to church; instead, it may include people coming to church more frequently each month, for example.
- 5.2. Linking final data for our diocese from October 2023 with our returns for October 2024 shows the following percentage changes in all-age AWA, Adult AWA and child AWA between the two years:

| | % change AWA 2023 to 2024 |
|---------|------------------------------|
| All age | 2.7% |
| Adult | 2.6% |
| Child | 3.4% |

- 5.3. The increase between 2023 and 2024 was higher for children at 3.4% than for adults at 2.6%. Nevertheless, this follows a few years when recovery was greater for adults than for children, so compared with 2019 figures, adult AWA was 87% of that in 2019 whereas the child AWA was 78% of the 2019 figure.
- 5.4. For further context, in 2024, over half of all our churches had a child AWA of fewer than 2 children, and over one quarter reported no children at all.
- 5.5. Between 2023 and 2024 we have seen some churches grow their congregations of adults and children in different ways. Further growth in attendance is possible and will be through new initiatives and learning from those churches that have introduced new initiatives and seen growth.

6. How have the different components of attendance fared between 2023 and 2024?

6.1. Size of church

- 6.1.1. In this analysis I grouped churches by equal quintile of diocesan AWA attendance in 2023 (1= 0.25 to 9.25, 2=9.50 to 19.75 ,3= 20 to 34.5, 4=34.75 to 72.75, and 5= 73

and higher. In our diocesan linked file 24 churches have an AWA over 200, and of these 5 are 300-500, 3 are 501-700 and 2 Oxford churches, St Ebbe's and St Aldate's, are over 1000.

6.1.2. However, these equal sized groups are different from how people generally view 'size of church', so I also analysed the information by whether the churches were smallest (up to 19.75), small (20 to 34.5), medium (34.75 to 74.75), large (75 to 99.75) or largest (100 or higher). As a result, the highest quintile included both large and largest churches, and the 4th quintile roughly equated to 'medium' churches.

6.1.3. Our previous report showed that the attendance recovery following the pandemic varied by church size – the smaller the church, on average, the stronger the recovery. The changes in attendance for each size of church by both classifications is given below. In both cases, the smallest churches saw the largest increase in attendance in percentage terms. However, in part this is due to a statistical phenomenon known as 'regression to the mean' which means that the smallest churches can only stay the smallest or get larger, and the largest churches can only stay the largest or get smaller, whereas those in the middle categories could move in either direction.

6.1.4. The small churches saw a small decrease of 1%, but when separated into deciles those in decile 2 saw an increase of 2% and those in decile 3 saw a very small decrease of 1.5%. Overall, those in deciles 4 saw a small decrease, and decile 5 saw an increase of 3.3%. However, when the decile 5 figures are separated into large and largest churches, the large churches saw an increase of 3.5% in comparison with the largest churches seeing an increase of 2.9%. This reinforces the message that while overall there is a small increase in attendance between 2023 and 2024, this varies by different characteristics and the changes are not always an increase.

| Quintile | % change 2023 to 2024 |
|-------------------|-----------------------|
| Smallest 1 | 30.7% |
| 2 | 2.2% |
| 3 | -1.5% |
| 4 | -0.3% |
| Biggest 5 | 3.3% |
| Total | 2.7% |

| Size | % change 2023 to 2024 |
|-----------------|-----------------------|
| smallest | 10.5% |
| small | -1.2% |
| medium | 1.5% |
| large | 3.5% |
| largest | 2.9% |
| Total | 2.7% |

6.2. Archdeaconry

6.2.1. Further evidence of the fragility of the increase seen in AWA between 2023 and 2024 is shown by the change in AWA between 2023 and 2024 by Archdeaconry.

6.2.2. As shown in the chart below, within an overall increase of 2.7% across the diocese, Oxford saw a 9.2% increase, Berkshire a 3.2% increase, Buckingham a 2.5% increase and Dorchester a 1.4% decrease.

| % change 2023 to 2024 | | | |
|-----------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Archdeaconry | AWA | Adult AWA | Child AWA |
| Oxford | 9.2% | 9.6% | 5.6% |
| Berkshire | 3.2% | 4.0% | -1.4% |
| Buckingham | 2.5% | 2.5% | 2.9% |
| Dorchester | -1.4% | -2.9% | 10.1% |
| Total | 2.7% | 2.6% | 3.4% |

6.2.3. The increase in Berkshire was due to an increase in adult attendance as their child AWA fell by 1.4% over the period. The increase in Oxford was mainly due to two large churches showing further large numerical increases. When considering the ten churches with the largest increase in AWA between 2023 and 2024, one had an AWA in 2023 of over 150 and the others all had an AWA of over 250. Six of the ten churches reported more services on average each week in 2024 than in 2023, an induction service for one of these churches had contributed to their increase in AWA in 2024, and in another church a regional service that moves to a different church each year had contributed to their increase in AWA. Of the ten churches with the largest decrease in AWA, nine were classified as large or largest. Six churches reported fewer services on average each week than they had held in 2023.

6.2.4. Oxford archdeaconry saw an overall increase of 9.2%, with an increase of 9.6% in adult attendance and a smaller increase of 5.6% in child attendance. Oxford archdeaconry, however, is much smaller in terms of number of churches than the other archdeaconries, so large changes seen in just one or two large churches can affect the overall AWA of the archdeaconry.

6.2.5. Of the 20 churches with the biggest increase in child AWA between 2023 and 2024, Dorchester archdeaconry had the largest number of churches reporting an increase. Although Dorchester is a predominantly rural diocese, 4 of their 6 churches with the highest increase in child AWA were in urban areas. 11 of the 20 churches with the highest increase reported more services on average each week in 2024 than in 2023, 11 were in the least deprived areas of our diocese, and 14 were in urban areas. None reported an interregnum although two had come out of an interregnum in 2024 and mentioned the work of their new vicar. Four of the churches had begun to work with a new children and families worker or a childrens' minister during the year.

6.2.6. Of the twenty churches with the biggest decrease in child AWA between 2023 and 2024, nine were in Berkshire archdeaconry. Nine reported that they were in an

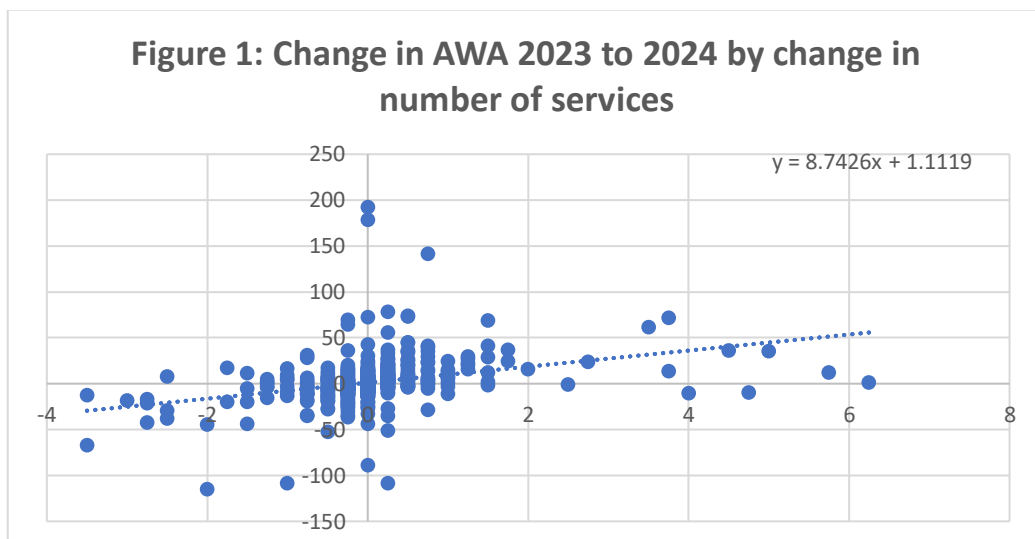
interregnum, and one had lost a children's worker during the year. They were equally spread among urban and rural areas but seventeen were in the largest churches quintile of churches. and twelve reported fewer services on average than they had in 2023.

6.3. Change in number of services.

6.3.1. In the first analysis in this series, comparing 2019 October AWA with that in 2022, we saw that the decrease in AWA between the two years was associated with a similar fall in the number of Sunday services offered by churches. So, one explanation for the fall in AWA was that rather than there being fewer people at each service, the average number of adults at a Sunday service was the same as it was in 2019; the total might be down because there were fewer services.

6.3.2. Between 2022 and 2023 the number of services offered across the diocese did not change, still being at 82% of the 2019 number, so it was suggested that one explanation for the increase in AWA between 2022 and 2023 was due to small increases in the average attendance at each service rather than in the number of services offered.

6.3.3. Between 2023 and 2024 the number of services held across the diocese remained at the 2023 level. However, some churches increased their number of services and others reduced them. On average if churches reduced their number of services between 2023 and 2024, this was associated with a fall in their AWA, whereas on average if they increased their number of services this was associated with an increase in their AWA. Figure 1 plots the change in AWA by the change in number of services 2023 to 2024. This shows that adding one service (horizontal axis) results on average in an additional AWA of 9 people.

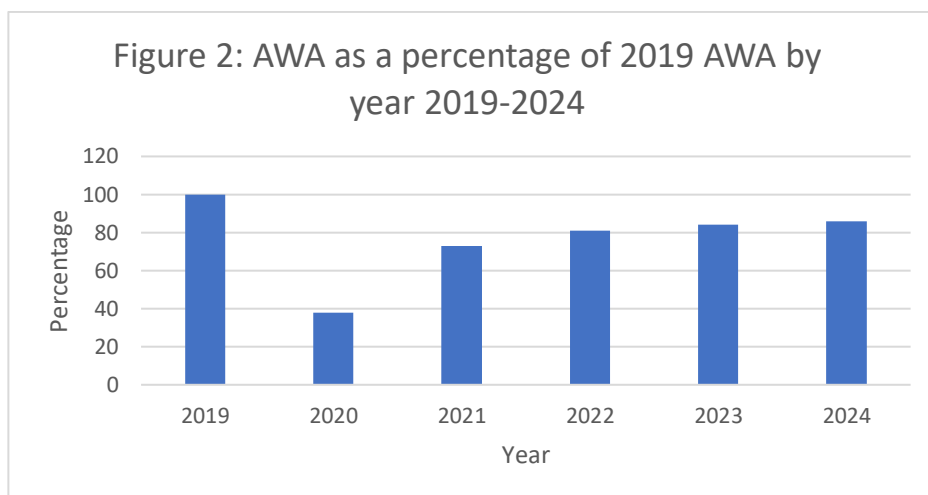


6.3.4. In October 2024, 29% of the churches in our linked file no longer had at least one Sunday service each week. This was the same as in 2023 based on the same group of churches. Almost all (96%) of the churches with fewer than 1 service per week were in rural areas, and 86% were in the smallest two quintiles by size. None of

the large or largest churches in 2024 had fewer than one service per week on average. In 2024 19% of our churches held exactly one service each week on average and the remaining 52% of churches on average held more than one service each week.

7. How does attendance in 2024 compare with 2019?

- 7.1. Last year I reported that overall attendance in October 2023 was 84% of the October 2019 figures. This comparison enabled us to measure recovery in attendance following the pandemic with the last attendance figure immediately before the pandemic.
- 7.2. The small increase in attendance of 2.7% between October 2023 and October 2024, as shown in Figure 2, was associated with a further increase in the comparison with 2019 figures to 86%. This small further increase suggests that we have now reached the end of post-pandemic attendance recovery.



8. Longer time trends

- 8.1. Figures 3, 4 and 5 show actual attendance data from 2014 to 2024 together with projected pre-pandemic trends. These trends are not telling us what would have happened if there had not been a pandemic, but they show what would have happened if the pre-pandemic trends (from 2014 to 2019) had continued. The 2024 figures are estimated from our linked 2023 and 2024 information and assume the remaining churches in our diocese show the same overall average changes in All age, Adult and Child AWA.
- 8.2. These estimates show that in 2024 All age AWA was 3.3% above the projected pre-pandemic trend and Adult AWA was 0.9% above. Child AWA exceeded the projected trend figure in 2023 and in 2024 the Child AWA was 19.5% above the projected trend. However, it should be noted that child attendance was declining at a faster rate than adult attendance prior to the pandemic, so in 2024 the Child AWA was still only at 79% of its 2019 level.

Figure 3: Actual and trend All Age AWA 2014-24

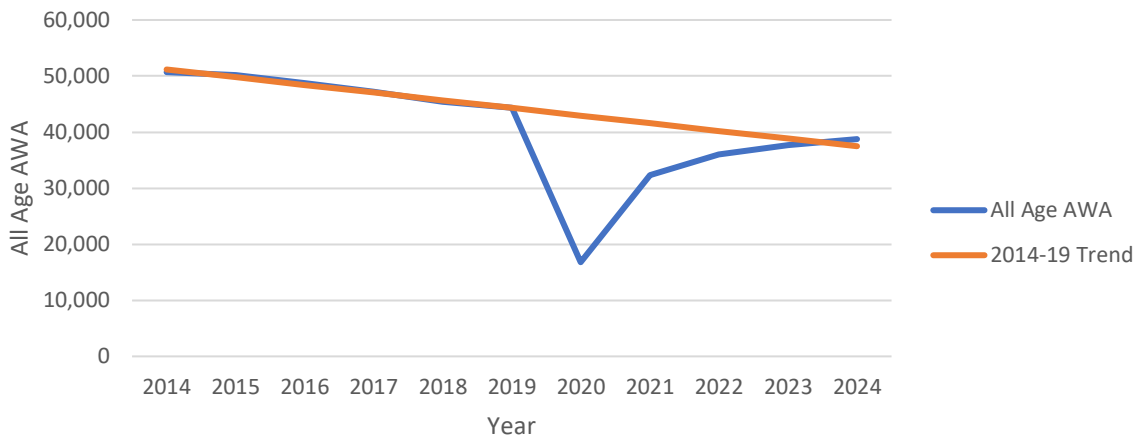


Figure 4. Actual and 2014-19 trend in Adult AWA 2014-2024

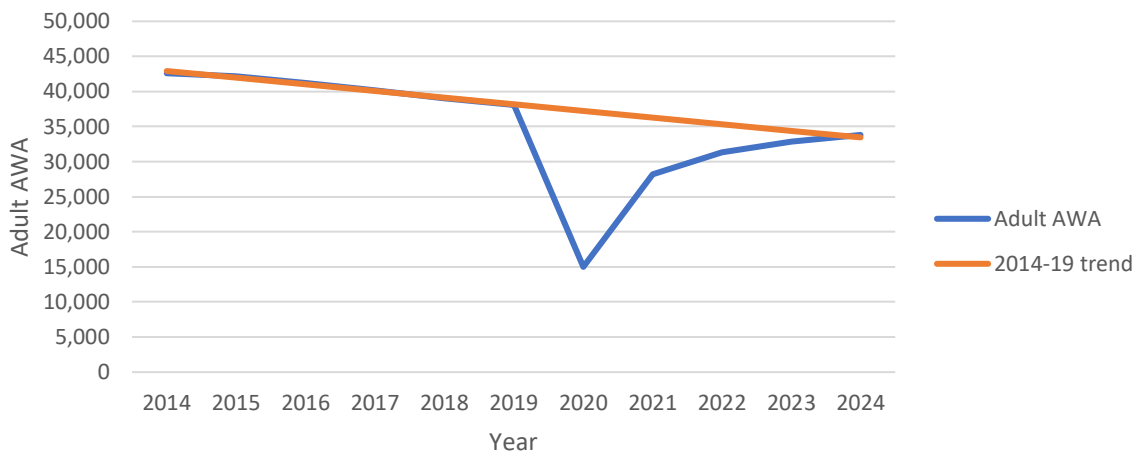
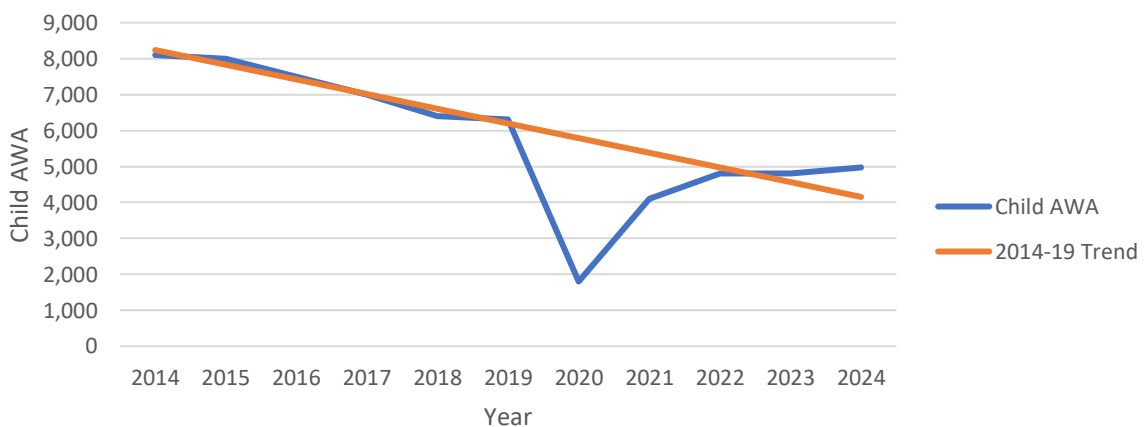
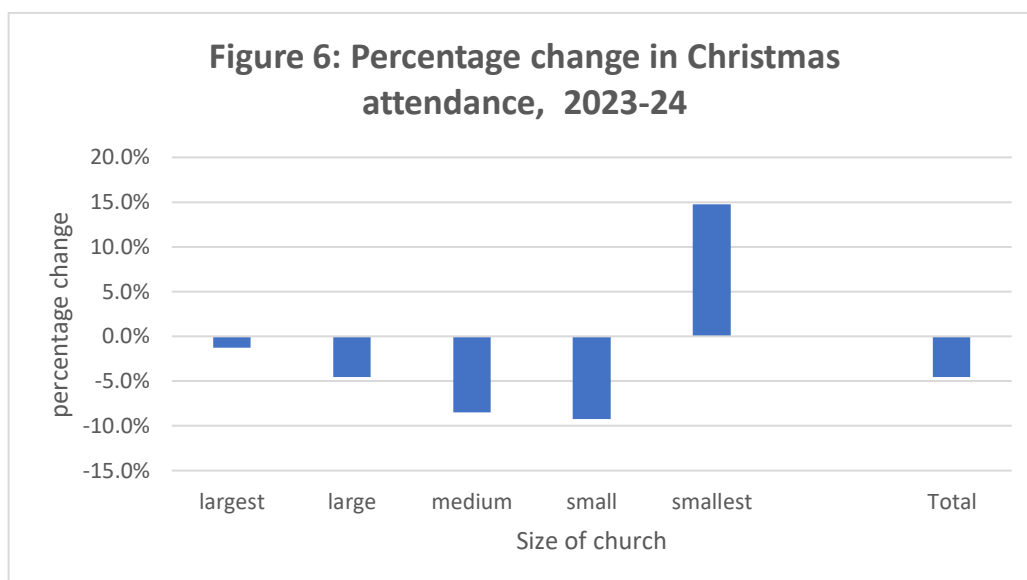


Figure 5. Actual and 2014-19 trend in Child AWA 2014-2024



9. Christmas 2024 attendance

- 9.1. I also analysed Christmas 2024 attendance from these linked Statistics for Mission returns. I compared their Christmas 2024 attendance against their Christmas attendance figures for 2019 and 2023 using the same methodology as used for the October comparisons.
- 9.2. As seen in Figure 6 below, comparing 2024 Christmas attendance for the linked church records with their figures from 2023 shows a decrease between 2023 and 2024 of 4.6% compared to an increase of 2.7% in their Average Weekly Attendance (AWA) based on their October attendance figures.
- 9.3. This decrease between 2023 and 2024 was seen in all sizes of church except the smallest. The increase in the smallest churches is not unexpected, since those churches classified as 'smallest' in 2023 could not get smaller (compared to the other size churches that could grow as well as shrink), and there may have been a reason their Christmas figures were artificially low in 2023 – for example fewer services than usual or indeed no services.



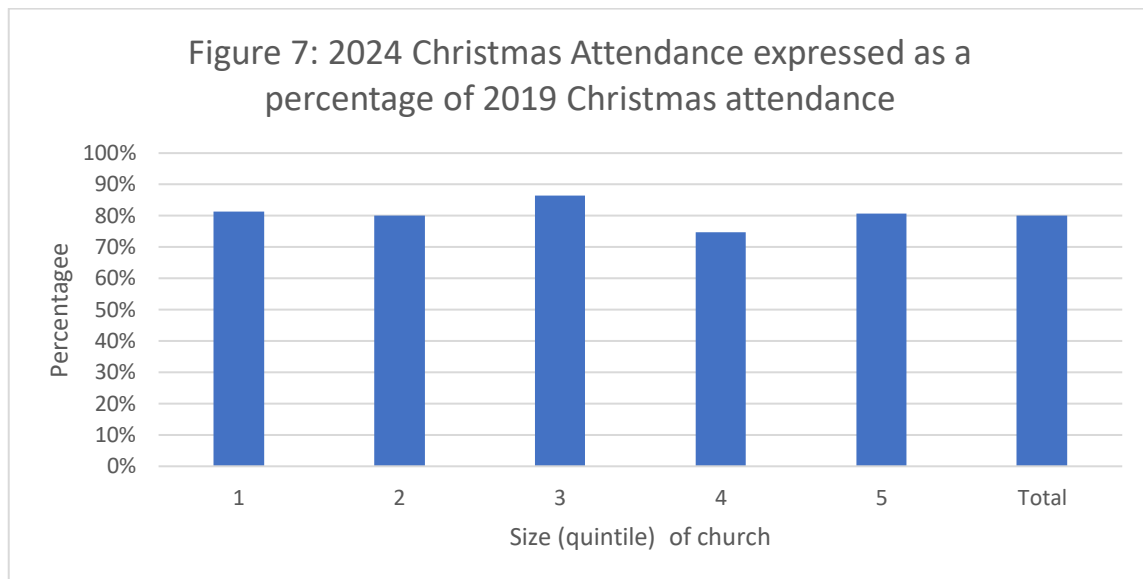
- 9.4. However, this overall decrease of 4.6% is not unexpected – we know that Christmas attendance figures are influenced by the effects of weather and on which day of the week Christmas Eve falls; factors that do not affect the October AWA. Previous analyses of Christmas figures have shown that figures are highest when Christmas Eve is on a Sunday. Christmas Eve 2023 fell on a Sunday, and Christmas Eve in 2024 was on a Tuesday (due to 2024 being a leap year)

[Christmas 2023 - Responding to anecdotal evidence of an increase in attendance - Diocese of Oxford](#)

- 9.5. There are several suggested reasons for the “day of the week” effect. Partly it is due to a decision taken many years ago include Christmas Eve attendance with Christmas Day for Statistics for Mission returns. This was done to include Midnight Mass attendance (whatever time it happens!) but this does mean the figures are also affected by carol service scheduling. Christmas Eve being a Sunday also means that Christmas Eve was

Advent 4, which makes a difference in some churches that do not do “Christmas” things during Advent. Therefore, their carol services could have been on the 24th rather than earlier, hence increasing Christmas attendance.

- 9.6. Comparing 2024 Christmas attendance for linked churches with their figures from Christmas 2019 (immediately before the pandemic) in Figure 7, however, shows that Christmas figures compared with 2019 have not recovered as much as have the AWA October figures. Overall Christmas attendance in 2024 was at 80% of the 2019 level, whereas the AWA was at 86% of the 2019 level. The pattern for Christmas attendance was similar in all sizes of church (with size here defined as the five equal groupings into quintiles from smallest (1) to largest (5)).



- 9.7. This analysis has shown that we saw a decrease in our Christmas attendance figures for 2024 compared with 2023. However, given that Christmas attendance is much more subject to variation than just about anything else we measure, thought to be due to the day of the week and weather and given that 2023 was expected to be a year when we had higher attendance due to Christmas Eve being on a Sunday, it is not surprising that we saw this decrease.

Bev Botting – March 2025