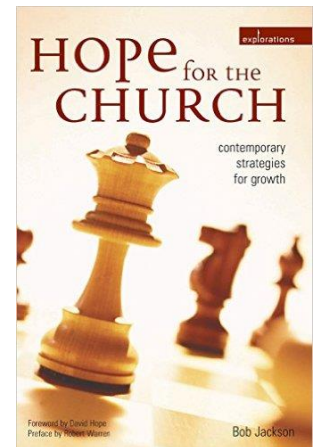


Bob Jackson

Hope for the Church : Contemporary Strategies for Growth

CHP 2002

Notes by Alison Morgan Jan 2003



Bob Jackson used to be a Government Economic Adviser, then an Anglican clergyman, and now works as Research Missioner for Springboard. His book is based on a careful statistical analysis of church attendance figures, looking at patterns of growth and decline in different geographical areas, across church traditions, types (rural, suburban, urban) and sizes. Bob concludes that numerical decline is not inevitable because it is not uniform, and looks at some of the growth strategies adopted by churches of all kinds which have succeeded in bucking the general trend. The book is readable, practical and immensely encouraging – it isn't rocket science! is perhaps the phrase which best summarises Bob's findings, and many of the chapters end with a page of practical steps a church can consider. Essential reading for everyone struggling with the question of where to go from here.

1. Facing the truth

A down-to-earth beginning: 'this book should not be read by Anglicans of a nervous disposition, because it gives the statistical evidence for an unpalatable truth: the CoFE is in decline, and has been for nearly a century.' This chapter starts with a detailed statistical summary of the facts – overall decline over the last 20 years according to every way of measuring it except financial. This has been going on since 1904; Bob suggests that the formulation of an anti-decline strategy by the CoFE is somewhat overdue, and points to the example of the Baptist Union who did just this at the start of the 90s and are now the only growing denomination in the UK. To encourage us he suggests we consider the following thought-provoking facts revealed by the statistics:

- decline is unevenly spread, with some dioceses showing serious loss and others steady growth
- decline is greatest amongst young people
- little churches are more likely to grow than big ones

Grounds for hope: 1 in 12 churches grew by over 10% in the 90s, 1 in 12 by over 60%. The whole diocese of London grew. If decline is not universal, it is not inevitable. It isn't to do with the culture.

2. Bums on seats – why they matter

Suggests that although numbers are not God's measure, we do have to face up to the basic fact that the Church is shrinking, and not offer ourselves spurious arguments why this is OK. Often church leaders end up planning for decline; why not plan for growth instead? He offers the analogy of a person who is overweight: the options are denial; despair; think about it all the time; make lifestyle changes. Same with the church. Wakefield diocese is doing just that, planning to see better teaching and community service on the one hand and increased congregations and giving on the other.

3. Church growth – mission possible

Society is changing, institutions declining. And yet humanity itself has not changed, or the gospel. Church growth is seen in the NT as natural – see for example 1 Corinthians 3, which likens the Church to a garden. Seeds will still grow: if the plant is in decline, it must be that we need better or different gardening methods. We must face up to the fact that the shrinking Church is not the victim of the irrelevant Jesus, Jesus is the victim of the irrelevant Church. Decline simply results from failure to adapt to a changing climate. Evidence that this is so comes from the many churches that are growing: the answer turns out to lie in identifiable good practices and healthy ways of living, and investigation suggests none of it is rocket science. Even modest reforms can turn a 2% pa decline into a 2% pa growth.

4. Bringing growth out of decline

This chapter offers a detailed statistical analysis of all the Anglican dioceses based on the 1989 English Church Census and the 1998 English Church Survey. In this period, total Anglican church attendance declined by 23%. But 22% of churches of all denominations grew by at least 10%. 7% of Anglican churches grew by at least 60%. The growing churches were spread over all sizes, traditions and locations. The evidence suggests they are growing because they have found a spiritual vitality and adopted some good practices that are available to all. York diocese declined from 1989 to 94, then grew from 94 to 99 – after looking at the figures and setting up a series of day conferences for leaders of the declining churches (which turned out to be the ones with 125+ members). Churches that took part halted their decline.

5. Why should the future be any different?

The Decade of Evangelism made no numerical difference; but it did put evangelism back on the map. The common perception is that evangelical-charismatic churches have been doing better than others; but in fact as all traditions embrace the need for evangelism and growth the differences are reducing, and detailed research shows that growing churches are of all types of churchmanship. Growth is possible for every type of church in every type of place. Insofar as there is a pattern small fellowships, which can provide the relational emphasis needed in today's culture, are the ones which are growing.

6. The Church after Christendom

Christianity no longer provides the framework of our culture, and often the culture seems hostile to it. Hard though this is, it is not in itself a reason for decline – the fastest growing churches in the world are in the places where persecution is the greatest. The church can be countercultural and survive. But if it is to do so we must rethink the nature of our faith (spirituality is in, religion is out), we must discern a new role for the church (servant rather than king), and we must re-imagine the church (structured around worship, community and mission rather than being an institution).

7. Using figures

We are good at collecting facts but poor at using them. Examples: a church which found some services showed declining attendance and replaced them with new ones at different times of day; a church which found that its best attended service was the declining one, and reversed this by the appointment of a children's coordinator and an Alpha coordinator. Churches which change service styles and patterns keep their people better than those which don't. Deaneries with declining evening congregations can pool resources, closing some evening services and starting new midweek ones. Dioceses need to look at their patterns of growth and decline, provide support for declining churches and identify common factors in growing ones; and they need to join up their financial and church growth thinking so as to avoid the vicious circle of parish share default followed by reduction in clergy followed by greater default. Central bodies need to invest more in research (not less).

8. Nurturing faith

Evangelism is now best understood not as event but as journey, our role being to stand alongside them as they make it. The typical journey moves from friendship to belonging to believing to behaving. Churches which run Alpha or other process evangelism courses for 3+ years tend to grow – responding to a measured increase in spiritual awareness in the population at large over the last 15 years.

9. Welcoming all

Churches which engage with a variety of cultures are more likely to grow than those dominated by one culture or type of person. Ethnically mixed churches grow better than all white ones, and those with youth provision grow better than those without; perhaps because these factors reveal willingness to engage with people 'not like us'. Churches that find ways of allowing diversity within their unity do better – eg by having different congregations with different

styles; by having cells which allow everyone a place and a role. Churches and deaneries can ask which community groups they are not reaching.

10. Taking risks

The institutional church needs to move from being a barrier to radical change to being an agent of it. Children – show the greatest decline. Churches can try working together, or doing children's work at different times (weeknights seem to work), or appointing youth workers (they seem to at least prevent decline). Churches which offer youth worship are twice as likely to grow as those which don't. Close links with schools also seem to go with growth.

11. Acting small – whatever your size

One surprising finding is that decline is a particular problem for larger churches (100-400 adults; bigger ones do OK). Small churches tend to be in rural communities and depend on lay ministry; and to have a better quality of relationships. Churches organised into small units in fact do better than those which aren't, whatever their size. York diocese reversed its decline by realising all the larger churches were where it was happening, and getting them together to brainstorm.

Reasons for decline in larger churches include : lack of close relationships within the fellowship, a consumer attitude, the more demanding nature of lay leadership, difficulty in integrating newcomers and noticing absentees, faster turnover in suburban areas, leadership burnout due to the higher demands, higher number of children, growing beyond the number of people one minister can pastor (100-150), more conflict (more relationships!), higher parish shares.

Solutions include : facing the facts, developing small units of belonging (cells or congregations), organising pastoral care, having a specialist leadership team, doing few things well, freeing the vicar to concentrate on oversight of pastoral team and vision rather than being pastor of the flock, and having the courage to be radical.

Small churches, on the other hand, need to be encouraged and helped to pool resources and develop lay ministry.

12. Planting churches

In countries where the Church is growing, it is by the planting of small new fellowships, not by the emergence of superchurches. We need to develop an active policy of planting churches. Most members of such plants are not transfers from other churches but lapsed churchgoers or new Christians. The CofE has planted the equivalent of a whole new diocese in the last 20 years! Small plant teams do best. Most new churches cater for a niche market which tends not to be catered for in the traditional church (CofE can now be called the National Trust at prayer...). Dioceses have a key role.

13. Growing younger

Anglicans are getting older – 1 in 3 is over 65. Only 1 in 6 clergy is under 40. As it is the younger generations that the Church has been losing, decline will continue unless they can be won back. Churches grow best when they have a spread of ages, young and old. To grow younger: look at your age profile and that of your area; appoint a 'growing younger' team; develop contacts in the community; adjust your social programmes; allow younger people to lead; employ younger staff. Dioceses also need to have younger people amongst its senior staff if they are to be in touch with the needs of young people.

14. Supporting the clergy

Good clergy are necessary for growth – but this research suggests that clergy skills are as important as clergy talent. In 2000 there were 4 clergy in the whole CofE under 25.. Younger clergy tend to be associated with church growth. Incumbencies of 9-13 years are associated with growth. Gospel enthusiasm is perhaps now more important than pastoral sensitivity as a selection criterion – we need missionaries not pastors. Theological colleges should perhaps offer more management skills and less academic theology. Church growth is not associated with particular theological colleges or training styles. Ongoing training would seem helpful; shorter working weeks; pastoral support;

better matching of individuals to parishes; selection of senior clergy on their church growth record not their committee record..

15. The vital role of the diocese

The ethos, culture, structure and policies of a diocese partly determine its growth or decline. It has an increasingly important role as the structures of society change; a diocese can see what is going on better than individual parish units. It can, for example, change parish boundaries, set up new non-geographical parishes to cater for the emerging world of relational community, encourage pioneers, set financial policies to encourage growth. New forms of church do not 'emerge' – they are planned and planted by visionaries, and dioceses are in a key position to facilitate this. Example: London diocese has a policy document for the years 2002-07 which sets out 5 commitments; 2 are about evangelism and church growth. Other dioceses are asking parishes to go through a review process such as that offered by Springboard, 'Growing healthy churches' .

16. Renewing the spiritual heart

Spiritual health is the priority. The Holy Spirit is untamed and free. The Church of the future will need a structure and a culture designed not to enshrine stability but to handle change.

www.alisonmorgan.co.uk